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J. C. SNAITH

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BY

J. C. SNAITH

AUTHOR OF "FORTUNE," "ARAMINTA,"
"BROKE OF COVENDEN," ETC.

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MRS. FITZ

CHAPTER I

ACCORDING TO REUTER

"It is snowing," said Mrs. Arbuthnot.

"Worse luck!" growled I from behind my newspaper. "This unspeakable climate! Why can't we sack the Clerk of the Weather!"

"Because he is a permanent official," said Joseph Jocelyn De Vere Vane-Anstruther, who was coming into the room. "And those are the people who run the benighted country."

Joseph Jocelyn De Vere Vane-Anstruther was in rather smart kit. It was December the first, and the hounds—there is only one pack in the United Kingdom —were about to pay an annual visit to the country of a neighbour. With conscious magnificence my relation by marriage took a bee-line to the sideboard. He paused a moment to debate to which of two imperative duties he should give the precedence: i.e. to make his daily report upon the personal appearance of his host, or to find out what there was to eat. The state of the elements enabled Mother Nature "to get a cinch" on an honourable æstheticisim. Jodey began to forage slowly but resolutely among the dish covers.

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"Kedgeree! Twice in a fortnight. Look here Mops, it won't do."

Mrs. Arbuthnot was perusing that journal which for the modest sum of one halfpenny purveys the glamour of history with only five per cent. of its responsibilities. She merely turned over a page. Her brother, having heaped enough kedgeree upon his plate to make a meal for the average person, peppered and salted it on a scale equally liberal and then suggested coffee.

"Tea is better for the digestion," said Mrs. Arbuthnot, with her natural air of simple authority.

"I know," said Jodey. "That is why I prefer the other stuff."

"Men are so reasonable!"

"Do you mind 'andin' the sugar?"

"Sugar will make you a welter and ruin your appearance."

A cardinal axiom of my friend Mrs. Josiah P. Perkins, neé Ogbourne, late of Brownsville, Mass., is "Horse-sense always tells." Among the daughters of men I know none whose endowment of this felicitous quality can equal that of the amiable participator in my expenditure. It told in this case.

"Better give me tea."

"Without sugar?" said Mrs. Arbuthnot with great charm of manner.

"A small lump," said Jodey as a concession to his force of character.

The young fellow stirred his tea with so much diligence that the small lump really seemed like a large

one. And then with a gravity that was somewhat sinister, he fixed his gaze on my coat and leathers.

"By a local artist of the name of Jobson," said I humbly. "The second shop on the right as you enter Middleham High Street."

"They speak for themselves."

"My father went there," said I. "My grandfather also. In my grandfather's day I believe the name of the firm was Wiseman and Grundy."

"It's not fair to 'ounds. If I was Brasset I should take 'em 'ome."

"If you were Brasset," I countered, "that would hardly be necessary. They would find their way home by themselves."

"Mops is to blame. She has been brought up properly."

"It comes to this, my friend. We can't both wear the breeches. Hers cost a pretty penny from those thieves in Regent Street."

"Maddox Street," said a bland voice from the recesses of the *Daily Courier*.

"Those bandits in Maddox Street," said I with pathos. "But for all I know it might be those sharks in the Mile End Road. I am a babe in these things."

"No, my dear Odo," said the young fellow, making his point somewhat elaborately, "in those things you are a perisher. An absolute perisher. I'm ashamed to be seen 'untin' the same fox with you. I should be ashamed to be found dead in the same ditch. I hate people who are not serious about clothes. It's so shallow."

My relation by marriage produced an extremely vivid

yellow silk handkerchief, and pensively flicked a speck of invisible dust off an immaculate buckskin.

"My God, those tops!"

"By a local draughtsman," said I, "of the name of Bussey. He is careful in the measurements and takes a drawing of the foot.

"'Orrible. You look like a Cossack at the Hippodrome."

"The Madam patronises an establishment in Bond Street. One is given to understand that various royalties follow her example."

"They make for the King of Illyria," said Mrs. Arbuthnot.

"That is interesting," said I in response to a quizzical glance from the breakfast table. The fact is my amiable coadjutor in the things of this life has a decided weakness for royalty. She denies it vehemently and betrays it shamelessly on every possible occasion.

"Very interestin' indeed," said her brother.

In the next moment a cry of surprise floated out of the depths of the halfpenny newspaper.

"What a coincidence!" exclaimed Mrs. Arbuthnot. "There has been an attempt on the life of the King of Illyria. They have thrown a bomb into his palace and killed the brother of the Prime Minister."

"In the interests of the shareholders of the *Daily Courier*," said I.

"Be serious, Odo," said Mrs. Arbuthnot. "To think of that dear old king being in danger!"

"Yes, the dear old king," said Jodey.

"I think you are horrid, both of you," said Mrs. Ar-

buthnot with the spirit that made her an admired member of the Crackanthorpe Hunt. "Those horrid Illyrians! They don't deserve to have a king. They ought to be like France and America and Switzerland."

"They will soon be in that unhappy position," said I, turning to page four of the *Times* newspaper. "According to Reuter, it appears to have been a *bonâ fide* attempt. Count Cyszysc——"

"You sneeze twice," suggested Jodey.

"Count Cyszysc was blown to pieces on the threshold of the Zweisgarten Palace, the whole of the south-west front of which was wrecked."

"The wretches!" said Mrs. Arbuthnot. "They are only fit to have a republic. Such a dear old man, the ideal of what a king ought to be. Don't you remember him in the state procession riding next to the Kaiser?"

"The old Johnny with the white hair," said Jodey, reaching for the marmalade.

"He looked every inch a king," said Mrs. Arbuthnot, "and Illyria is not a very large place either."

"In a small and obscure country," I ventured to observe, "you have to look every inch a king, else nobody will believe that you are one. In a country as important as ours it doesn't matter if a king looks like a commercial traveler."

"By the way," said Jodey, who had a polite horror of anything that could be construed as *lèse majesté*, "where is Illyria?"

"My dear fellow," said I, "don't you know where Illyria is?"

"I'll bet you a pony that you don't either," said Jodey, striving, as young fellows will, to cover his ignorance by a display of effrontery.

"Haven't you been to Blaenau ? Don't you know the Sveltkes, hoch! hoch!"

"No; do you?" said the young fellow, brazenly.

"They are the oldest reigning family in Europe," said Mrs. Arbuthnot severely.

"How do you know that, Mops?" said the sceptical youth.

"It says so in the German 'Who's Who,'" said the Madam sternly. "I looked them up on purpose."

"My dear fellow," said I, "if you knew a little less about polo, and a little less about hunting the fox, and a little more about geography and foreign languages and the things that make for efficiency, you would be *au courant* with the kingdom of Illyria and its reigning family. Tell the young fellow where that romantic country is, old lady."

"First you go to Paris," said the Madam, with admirable lucidity. "And then, I'm not sure, but I think you come to Vienna, and then I believe you cut across and you come to Illyria. And then you come to Blaenau, the capital, where the King lives, which is five hundred miles from St. Petersburg as the crow flies, because I've marked it on the map."

"Well, if you've really marked it on the map," said I, "it is only reasonable to assume that the kingdom of Illyria is in a state of being."

"You are too absurd," said Mrs. Arbuthnot. "The place is well known and its king is famous."

"I wonder if there is decent shooting in Illyria," said Jocelyn De Vere, with that air of tacit condescension which gained him advancement throughout the English-speaking world. "One might try it for a week to shew one has no feelin' against it."

"Where there is a king there is always decent shooting," I ventured to observe.

Mrs. Arbuthnot returned to her newspaper.

"They want to form a republic in Illyria," she announced, "but the old king is determined to thwart them."

"A bit of a sportsman, evidently," said her brother. "But never mind Illyria. Give me some more coffee. We've got to be at the Cross Roads by eleven."

"No mortal use, I am afraid," said I. "The glass has gone right back. And look through the window."

"Good old British climate! And on that side they've got one of the best bits o' country in the shires, and Morton's covers are always choke full of foxes."

In spite of his pessimism, however, my relation by marriage continued to deal faithfully with the modest repast that had been offered him. Also he was fain to inquire of the mistress of the house whether *enough* sandwiches had been cut and whether *both* flasks had been filled; and from the nominal head of our modest establishment he sought to learn what arrangements had been made for the second horsemen.

"They will not be wanted to-day, I fear."

"Pooh, a few flakes o' snow!"

It was precisely at this moment that the toot of a motor horn was heard. A sixty horse power six cylin-

dered affair of the latest design was seen to steal through the shrubbery en route to the front door.

"Why, wasn't that Brasset?"

"His car certainly."

"What does the blighter want?"

"He has brought us the information that Morton has telephoned through to say that there is a foot of snow on the Wolds and that hounds had better stay at the kennels."

"Pooh," said Jodey, "he wouldn't have troubled to come himself. You've got a telephone, ain't you?"

"Doubtless he also wishes to confer with Mrs. Arbuthnot upon the state of things in Illyria. He is a very serious fellow with political ambitions."

Further I might have added, which however I did not, that the Master of the Crackanthorpe was somewhat assiduous in his attitude of respectful attention towards my seductive co-participator in this vale of tears, who on her side was rather apt to pride herself upon an old-fashioned respect for the peerage. The prospect of a visit from the noble Master caused her to discard the affairs of the Illyrian monarchy in favour of a subject even more pregnant with interest.

"If it is Reggie Brasset," said she, renouncing the *Daily Courier*, "he has come about Mrs. Fitz."

"Get out!" said the scornful Jodey. "You people down here have got Mrs. Fitz on the brain."

Out of the mouths of babes! It was perfectly true that in our own little corner of the world people *had* got Mrs. Fitz on the brain.

CHAPTER II

TRIBULATIONS OF A M.F.H.

Brasset it certainly was. And when he came into the room looking delightfully healthy, decidedly handsome and a great deal more serious than a minister of the Crown, his first words were to the effect that Morton had telephoned through to say that they had a foot of snow on the Wolds and that hounds had better stay where they were.

"Awfully good of you, Brasset, to come and tell us," said I heartily. "Have some breakfast."

"No, thanks," said Brasset. "The fact is, as we are not going over to Morton's I thought this would be a good opportunity to— to——"

For some reason the noble Master did not appear to know how to complete his sentence.

"Yes, Lord Brasset," said Mrs. Arbuthnot, with an air of acute intelligence.

"A good opportunity to—to—" said Brasset, who in spite of his seriousness really looked absurdly young to be the master of such a pack as ours.

"Yes, Lord Brasset," said Mrs. Arbuthnot again.

"Yes, quite so, my dear fellow," said I, without, as I hope and believe, the least appearance of levity, for the uncompromising eye of authority was upon me.

"What's up, Brasset?" said Jodey, who contrary to the regulations was lighting his pipe at the breakfast table, and who combined with his many engaging qualities an extremely practical mind. "You want a glass of beer. Parkins, bring his lordship a glass of beer."

With this aid to the body corporeal in his hand, and with a pair of large, serious and admirably solicitous eyes fixed upon him, the noble Master made a third attempt to complete his sentence. This time he succeeded.

"The fact is," said he, "I thought this would be a good opportunity to—to—" Here the noble Master made a heroic dash for England, home and glory—"to talk over this confounded business of Mrs. Fitz."

Mrs. Arbuthnot sat bolt upright with an air of ecstasy and the expression "there, what did I tell you!" written all over her.

"Quite so, my dear fellow," said I, in simple good faith, but happening at that moment to intercept a glance from a feminine eye, had perforce to smother my countenance somewhat hastily in the voluminous folds of *The Times*.

"What about her?" inquired the occupant of the breakfast table, who whatever the angels might happen to be doing at any given moment, never hesitated to walk right in with both feet. "I was saying to Arbuthnot and my sister just as you came in, that you people down here have got Mrs. Fitz on the brain."

"Yes, I am afraid we have," said Brasset ruefully. "The fact is, things are coming to such a pass that they can't go on."

"I agree with you, Lord Brasset," said Mrs. Arbuthnot, with conviction.

"Something must be done."

"It is so uncomfortable for everybody," said Mrs. Arbuthnot, "and I can promise this, Lord Brasset." The fair speaker looked ostentatiously away from the vicinity of the leading morning journal. "Whatever steps you decide to take in the matter will have the entire sympathy and support of every woman subscriber to the Hunt."

"Thank you very much indeed, Mrs. Arbuthnot," said the noble Master, with feeling. "I am very grateful to you. It will help me very much."

" We held a meeting in Mrs. Catesby's drawing-room on Sunday afternoon. We passed a resolution expressing the fullest confidence in you—I wish, Lord Brasset, you could have heard what was said about you—" The Master's picturesque complexion achieved a more roseate tinge. "Our unanimous support and approval was voted to you in all that you may feel called upon to do."

"A thousand thanks, my dear Mrs. Arbuthnot."

"And we hope you will turn Mrs. Fitz out of the Hunt. I also brought forward an amendment that Fitz be turned out as well, but it was decided by six votes to four to give him another chance. But in the case of Mrs. Fitz the meeting was absolutely unanimous."

"My God!" said the occupant of the breakfast table, "If that ain't the limit!"

"Mrs. Fitz is a good deal more than the limit." Mrs. Arbuthnot's eyes sparkled with truculence.

"Have a cigarette, my dear fellow," said I, offering my case to the unfortunate Brasset as soon as the state of my emotions would permit me to do so.

Brasset selected a cigarette with an air of intense melancholy. As he applied the lighted match that was offered him he favoured me with an eye that was so woe-begone that it must have moved a heart of stone to pity. On the contrary, my fellow pilgrim through this vale of tears had turned a most becoming shade of pink, which she invariably does when she is really out upon the war-path. Also in her china blue eyes—I hope such a description of these weapons will pass the Censor—was a look of grim unalterable ruthlessness, before which men quite as stout as Brasset have had to quail.

The noble Master took a draw at his Egyptian.

"Look here, Arbuthnot," said he, "you are a wise chap, ain't you?"

"He thinks he's wise," said my helpmeet.

"Every man does," said I, modestly, "not necessarily" as an article of faith but as a point of ritual."

"Yes, of course," said Brasset with an air of intelligence that imposed upon nobody. "But everybody says you are the wise chap. That little Mrs. Perkins says you are the wisest chap she has met out of London."

This indiscretion on the part of Brasset—some men have so little tact!—provoked a stiffening of plumage; and if the china blue eyes did not shoot forth a spark this chronicle is not likely to be of much account.

"Stick to the point, if you please," said I. "I plead guilty to being a Solomon."

"Well, as you are a wise chap," said the blunderer, "and I'm by the way of being an ass——"

"I don't agree with you at all, Lord Brasset," piped a fair admirer.

"Oh, but I am, Mrs. Arbuthnot," said Brasset, dissenting with that courtesy in which he was supreme. "It's awfully good of you to say I'm not, but everybody knows I am not much of a chap at most things."

"You may not be so clever as Odo," said the wife of my bosom, "because Odo's exceptional. But you are an extremely able man all the same, Lord Brasset."

"She means to attend that sale at Tatt's on Wednesday," said the occupant of the breakfast table in an aside to the marmalade.

"Well, if I am not such a fool as I think I am,"—so perfect a sincerity disarmed criticism—"it is awfully good of you Mrs. Arbuthnot to say so. But what I mean is, I should like Arbuthnot's advice on the subject of—on the subject of——"

"On the subject of Mrs. Fitz," said Mrs. Arbuthnot with the coo of the dove and the glance of the rattlesnake.

"Ye-es," said the noble Master, nervously dropping the ash from his cigarette on to a very expensive tablecloth.

"Odo will be very pleased indeed, Lord Brasset," said the superior half of my entity, "to give you advice about Mrs. Fitz. He agrees with me and Mary Catesby and Laura Glendinning, that she must be turned out of the Hunt."

Poor Brasset removed a bead of perspiration from

the perplexed melancholy of his features with a silk handkerchief of vivid hue, own brother to the one sported by the Bayard at the breakfast table, in a futile attempt to cope with his dismay.

"Is it usual, Mrs. Arbuthnot?"

"It may not be usual, Lord Brasset, but Mrs. Fitz is not a usual woman."

"My dear Irene," said I judicially—Mrs. Arbuthnot rejoices in the classical name of Irene—"My dear Irene, I understand Brasset to mean that there is nothing in the articles of association of the Crackanthorpe Hunt to provide against the contingency of Mrs. Fitz or any other British matron overriding hounds as often as she likes.

Although I have had no regular legal training beyond having once lunched in the hall of Gray's Inn, everybody knows my uncle the judge. But I regret to say that this weighty deliverance did not meet with entire respect in the quarter in which it was entitled to look for it.

"That is nonsense, Odo," said Mrs. Arbuthnot. "I am sure the Quorn——"

Brasset's misery assumed so acute a phase at the mention of the Quorn that Mrs. Arbuthnot paused sympathetically.

"The Quorn—my God!" muttered the Bayard at the breakfast table in an aside to the tea-kettle.

"Or the Cottesmore," continued the undefeated Mrs. Arbuthnot, "would not stand such behaviour from a person like Mrs. Fitz."

"Do you think so, Mrs. Arbuthnot?" said the noble

Master. "You see we shouldn't like to get our names up by doing something unusual."

"An unusual person must be dealt with in an unusual way," said Mrs. Arbuthnot with great sententiousness. "Mary Catesby thinks——"

The long arm of coincidence is sometimes very startling, and I can vouch for it that the entrance of Parkins at this psychological moment to herald the appearance of Mary Catesby in the flesh, greatly impressed us all as something quite beyond the ordinary.

"Why, here *is* Mary," said Mrs. Arbuthnot, giving that source of light and authority a cross-over kiss on both cheeks. It is the hallmark of the married ladies of our neighbourhood that they all delight to exhibit an almost exaggerated reverence for Mary Catesby.

I have great esteem for Mary Catesby myself. For one thing, she has deserved well of her country. The mother of three girls and five boys, she is the British matron *in excelsis*; and apart from the habit she has formed of riding in her horse's mouth, she has every attribute of the best type of Christian gentlewoman. She owns to thirty-nine—to follow the ungallant example of Debrett!—is the eldest daughter of a peer, and is extremely authoritative in regard to everything under the sun, from the price of eggs to the table of precedence.

The admirable Mary—her full name is Mary Augusta—may be a trifle over-elaborated. Her horses are well up to fourteen stone. And as matter and mind are one and the same, it is sometimes urged against her that her manner is a little overwhelming. But this is

to seek for blemishes on the noonday sun of female excellence. One of a more fragile cast might find such a weight of virtue a burden. But Mary Catesby wears it like a flower.

In addition to her virtue she was also wearing a fur cloak which was the secret envy of the entire feminine population of the county, although individual members thereof made it a point of honour to proclaim for the benefit of one another: "Why *does* Mary persist in wearing that ermine-tailed atrocity! She really can't know what a fright she looks in it."

As a matter of fact, Mary Catesby in her fur cloak is one of the most impressive people the mind of man can conceive. That fur cloak of hers can stop the Flying Dutchman at any wayside station between Land's End and Paddington; and on the platform at the annual distribution of prizes at Middleham Grammar School, I have seen more than one small boy so completely overcome by it, that he has dropped "Macaulay's Essays" on the head of the reporter of the *Advertiser*.

Besides this celebrated garment, Mary was adorned with a bowler hat with enormous brims, not unlike that affected by Mr. Weller the Elder as Cruickshank depicted him, and so redoubtable a pair of butcher boots as literally made the earth tremble under her.

Her first remark was addressed, quite naturally, to the unfortunate Brasset, who had been rendered a little pinker and a little more perplexed than he already was by this notable woman's impressive entry.

"I consider this weather disgraceful," said she. "It

always is when we go over to Morton's. Why is it, Reggie?"

She spoke as though the luckless Reggie was personally responsible for the weather and also for the insulting manner in which that much-criticised British institution had deranged her plans.

"I am awfully sorry, Mrs. Catesby. Not much of a day, is it?"

"Disgraceful. If one can't have better weather than this, one might as well go and have a week's skating at Prince's."

The idea of Mary Catesby having a week's skating at Prince's seemed to appeal to Joseph Jocelyn De Vere. At least that sportsman was pleased not a little.

"English style or Continental?" said he.

Mary Catesby did not deign to heed.

"I am awfully sorry, Mrs. Catesby," said Brasset again, with really beautiful humility.

Mrs. Catesby declined to accept this delightfully courteous apology, but gazed down her chin at the unfortunate Brasset with that ample air which invariably makes her look like Minerva as Titian conceived that deity. Silently, pitilessly, she proceeded to fix the whole responsibility for the weather upon the Master of the Crackanthorpe.

She had just performed this feat with the greatest efficiency, when by no means the least of her admirers put in an oar.

"I'm so glad you've come, Mary," said Mrs. Arbuthnot. "We were just having it out with Lord Brasset about Mrs. Fitz."

An uncomfortable silence followed.

"Is she a subject for discussion in a mixed company?" said I to relieve the tension.

"I should say not," said Mary. "But Reggie has been so weak that there is no help for it."

"The victim of circumstances, perhaps," said I, with generous unwisdom.

"People who are weak always are the victims of circumstances. If Reggie had only been firmer at the beginning, we should not now be a laughing stock for everybody. To my mind the first requisite in a master of hounds, is resolution of character."

"Hear, hear," said the occupant of the breakfast table, *sotto voce.*

The miserable Brasset whose pinkness and perplexity were ever increasing, fairly quivered before the Great Lady's forensic power.

"Do you think, Mrs. Catesby, I ought to resign?" said he, with the humility that invites a kicking.

"Not *now*, surely; it would be too abject. If you felt the situation was beyond you, you should have resigned at the beginning. You must show spirit, Reggie. You must not submit to being trampled on publicly by—by——"

The Great Lady paused, not because she was at a loss for a word, but because like all born orators, she had an instinctive knowledge of the value of a pause in the right place.

"By a circus rider from Vienna," she concluded in a level voice.

CHAPTER III

THE CASE FOR THE PROSECUTION

"I KNOW, Mrs. Catesby, I'm not much of a chap," said Brasset, "but what's a feller to do? I did drop a hint to Fitz you know."

"Fitz!" The art of *littérateur* can only render a scorn so sublime by two marks of exclamation.

"What did Fitz say?" I ventured to inquire.

"Scowled like blazes," said Brasset miserably. "Thought the cross-grained, three-cornered devil would eat me. Beg pardon, Mrs. Catesby."

The Noble Master subsided into his glass of beer in the most lamentably ineffectual manner.

I cleared my voice in the consciousness that I had an uncle a judge.

"Brasset," said I, "will you kindly inform the court what are the specific grounds of complaint against this much maligned and unfortunate—er female?"

"Don't make yourself ridiculous, Odo!"

"Odo, you know perfectly well!"

It was a dead heat between Mrs. Arbuthnot and the Great Lady.

"Order, order," said I sternly. "This scene belongs to Brasset. Now Brasset, answer the question, and then perhaps something may be done."

It was not to be however. The nephew of my uncle failed lamentably to exact obedience to the chair.

"My dear Odo," said Mary Catesby, in what I can only describe as her Albert Hall manner, with her voice going right up to the top like a flag going up a pole, "do you mean to tell *me*——?"

"—That you don't know how Mrs. Fitz has been carrying on!" the Madam chipped in with really wonderful cleverness.

"I don't, upon oath," said I solemnly. "You appear to forget that I have been giving my time to the nation during this abominable autumn session."

"So he has, poor dear," said the partner of my joy.

"Like a good citizen," said Mary Catesby, most august of Primrose Dames.

"Thank you, Mary, I deserve it. But am I to understand that Mrs. Fitz has flung her cap over the mill, or that she has taken to riding astride, or is it that she continues to affect that scarlet coat which last season hastened the end of the Dowager?"

"No, Arbuthnot." It was the voice of Brasset, vibrating with such deep emotion that it can only be compared to the *Marche Funèbre* performed upon a cathedral organ. "But it was only by God's mercy that last Tuesday morning she didn't override Challenger."

"Allah is great," said I.

"Upon my solemn word of honour," said the noble Master, speaking from the depths, "she was within two inches of the old gal's stern."

"Parkins," said a voice from the breakfast table, "bring another glass of beer for his lordship."

To be perfectly frank, liquid sustenance was no longer a vital necessity to the noble Master. He was already rosy with indignation at the sudden memory of his wrongs. Only one thing can induce Brasset to display even a normal amount of spirit. That is the welfare of the sacred charges over which he presides for the public weal. He will suffer you to punch his head, to tread on his toe, or to call him names, and as likely as not, he will apologise sweetly for any inconvenience you may have incurred in the process. But if you belittle the Crackanthorpe Hounds or in any way endanger the humblest member of the Fitzwilliam strain, woe unto you. You transform Brasset into a veritable man of blood and iron. He is invested with pathos and dignity. The lightnings of heaven flash from beneath his long-lashed orbs; and from his somewhat narrow chest, there is bodied forth a far richer vocabulary than the general inefficiency of his appearance can possibly warrant in any conceivable circumstance.

Mere feminine clamour was silenced by Brasset transformed. His blue eyes glowed, his cheeks grew rosier, each particular hair of his perfectly charming little blond moustache, trimmed by Truefitt once a fortnight, stood up on end like quills upon the fretful porpentine. In lieu of pink abasement was tawny denunciation.

"I'll admit, Arbuthnot," said the Man of Blood and Iron, "I *looked* at the woman as no man ought to look at a lady."

"Didn't you say 'damn,' Lord Brasset?" piped a demure seeker after knowledge.

"I may have done, Mrs. Arbuthnot, I admit I may have done."

"I think that ought to go down on the depositions," said I, with an approximation to the manner of my uncle, the judge, that was very tolerable for an amateur.

"I *honour* you for it, Lord Brasset. Don't you, Mary?"

"Endeavour not to embarrass the witness," said I. "Go on, Brasset."

"Brasset, here's your beer," said Jodey rising from the table and personally handing the Burton brew with vast solemnity.

"I may have damned her eyes," proceeded the witness, "or I mayn't have done. You see, she was within two inches of the old gal, and I may have lost my head for a bit. I'll admit that no man ought to damn the eyes of a lady. Mind, I don't say I did. And yet I don't say I didn't. It all happened before you could say 'knife,' and I'll admit I was rattled."

"The witness admits he was rattled," said I.

"So would you have been, old son," the witness continued magniloquently. "Within two inches, upon my oath."

"Were there reprisals on the part of the lady whose eyes you had damned in a moment of mental duress?"

"*Rather.* She damned mine in Dutch."

Sensation.

"How did you know it was Dutch, Lord Brasset?" piped a seeker of knowledge.

"By the behaviour of the hounds, Mrs. Arbuthnot."

"How did they behave?"

"The beggars bolted."

Sensation.

"My aunt," said the occupant of the breakfast table with solemn irrelevance.

"So would you," said the noble Master. "I never heard anything like it. In my opinion there is no language like Dutch when it comes to cursing. And then before I could blink, up went her hand, and she gave me *one* over the head with her crop."

Sensation.

"Upon my solemn word of honour. I don't mind shewing the mark to anybody."

"Where is it, Lord Brasset?"

Mrs. Arbuthnot rose from her chair in the ecstatic pursuit of first hand information. Her eyes were wide and glowing like those of her small daughter, Miss Lucinda, when she hears the story of "The Three Bears."

"Shew *me* the scar, Reggie," said a Minerva-like voice.

"Let's see it, Brasset," said the occupant of the breakfast table, kicking over a piece of Chippendale of the best period and incidentally breaking the back of it.

The somewhat melodramatic investigation of a thick layer of Rowland's Macassar oil and a thin layer of fair hair disclosed an unmistakable weal immediately above the left temple of the noble martyr in the cause of public duty.

"If it don't beat cockfighting!" said Jodey in a tone of undisguised admiration.

"If it hadn't been for the rim of my cap," said the

noble martyr in response to the public enthusiasm, "it must have laid my head clean open."

"In my opinion," said Mary Catesby, speaking *ex cathedra*, "that woman is a perfect devil. Reggie, if you only shew firmness you can count upon support. They may stand that sort of thing in a Continental circus, but we don't stand it in the Crackanthorpe Hunt."

"Firmness, Brasset," said I, anxiously like all the world, to echo the oracle.

The little blond moustache was subjected to inhuman treatment.

"It's all very well, you know, but what's the use of being firm with a person who is just as firm as yourself?"

The Great Lady snorted.

"For three years, Reggie, you have filled a difficult office passably well. Don't let a little thing like this be your undoing."

"All very well, Mrs Catesby, but I can't hit her over the head, can I?"

"No, but what about Fitz?" said a voice from the breakfast table.

'Ye-es, I hadn't thought of that."

"And I shouldn't think of it if I were you," said I cordially. "Fitz with all his errors is a heftier chap than you are, my son."

Brasset's jaw dropped doubtfully—it is quite a good jaw, by the way.

"Practise the left a bit, Brasset," was the advice of the breakfast table. "I know a chap in Jermyn Street who has had lessons from Burns. We might trot up and

see him after lunch. Bring a Bradshaw, Parkins. And I think we had better send a wire."

"I wasn't so bad with my left when I was up at Trinity," said Brasset.

Mrs. Arbuthnot shuddered audibly. She has long been an out and out admirer of the noble Master's nose. Certainly its contour has great elegance and refinement.

"Brasset," said I, "let me urge you not to listen to evil communications. If you were Burns himself you would do well to play very lightly with Fitz. He was my fag at school, and although sometimes there was occasion to visit him with an ash plant or a toasting fork in the manner prescribed by the house regulations at that ancient seat of learning, I shouldn't advise you or anybody else to undertake a scheme of personal chastisement."

"Certainly not, Reggie," said Mary Catesby, in response to Mrs. Arbuthnot's imploring gaze. "Odo is perfectly right. Besides you must behave like a gentleman. It is the woman with whom you must deal."

"Well, I can't hit her, can I?" said Brasset plaintively.

"If a cove's wife hit me over the head with a crop," said the voice of youth, "I should want to hit the cove that had the wife that hit me, and so would Odo. I see there's a train at two fifteen gets to town at five."

Brasset's eyes are as softly, translucently blue as those of Miss Lucinda, but in them was the light of battle. He no longer tugged at his upper lip, but stroked it gently. To those conversant with these mysteries, this portent was sinister.

"Is Genée on at the Empire?" said he.

"Parkins knows," said Jodey.

Parkins did know.

"Yes, my lord," said that peerless factotum, "she is."

In parenthesis, I ought to mention that Parkins is the *piece de resistance* of our modest establishment. Not only is he highly accomplished in all the polite arts practised by man, but also he is a walking compendium of exact information.

"How's this?" said Jodey, proceeding to read aloud the telegram he had composed with studious care. "Dine self and pal Romano's 7.30. Empire afterwards. Book three stalls in centre."

"Wouldn't the side be better?" said Brasset. "Then you are out of the draught."

Before this important correction could be made Mary Catesby lifted her voice in all its natural majesty.

"Reginald Philip Horatio," said the most august of her sex, "as one who dressed dolls and composed hymns with your poor dear mother before she made her imprudent marriage, I forbid you absolutely to fight with such a man as Nevil Fitzwaren. It is not seemly, it is not Christian, and Nevil Fitzwaren is a far more powerful man than yourself."

"Science will beat brute force at any hour of the day or night," was the opinion of the breakfast table.

Mrs. Catesby fixed the breakfast table with her invincible north eye.

"Joseph, pray hold your tongue. This is very wrong advice you are giving to a man who is rather older and quite as foolish as yourself."

The Bayard of the breakfast table rebutted the indictment.

"The advice is sound enough," said he. "My pal in Jermyn Street has won no end of pots as a middle weight and he'll soon have a go at the heavies now he's taken to supping at the Savoy. He'll put Brasset all right. He's clever as daylight, a pupil of Burns. I tell you what, Mrs. C., if Brasset leads off with a left and a right and follows up with a half-arm hook on the point, in my opinion he'll have a walk over."

"Reggie, I forbid you *absolutely*," said the early collaborator with the noble Master's mother. "It is so uncivilised; besides, if Nevil Fitzwaren happened to be the first to lead off with a half-arm hook on the point, we should probably require a new master. And that would be so awkward. It was always a maxim of my dear father's that foxes were the only things that profited by a change of mastership in the middle of December."

"Your dear father was right, Mary," said I gravely.

"Dear father was infallible. But seriously, Reggie, if anything happened to you we should really have nobody to take the hounds now that for some obscure reason they have made Odo a member of Parliament."

"If a cove's wife hit me," came the refrain from the breakfast table in a kind of drone, "I should want to hit the cove that had the wife that hit me. See that this wire is sent, Parkins, and tell Kelly that I am running up to town by the 2.15 and shall stay the night."

"Jody, don't be a fool," said I. "Brasset, I want to say this. I hope you are listening, Mary, and you too,

Irene. Where Fitz and his wife are concerned, we have all got to play lightly."

I summoned all the earnestness of which I am capable. Even Mary Catesby was impressed by such an air of conviction.

"I fail to see," said she, "why we should be so especially considerate of the feelings of the Fitzwarens, when they are the last to consider the feelings of others."

"You can take it from me, Mary, that Fitz and his wife are not to be judged altogether by ordinary standards. They are extraordinary people."

"Tell me what you mean by the term extraordinary?" said my inquisitorial spouse.

"Does it really require explanation, *mon enfant?*"

"It means," said the plain-spoken Mary, "that Nevil Fitzwaren is an extraordinary reckless and dissolute type of fellow, and that Mrs. Nevil is an extraordinarily unpleasant type of woman."

I am the first to admit that that ineffectual thing, the mere human male, is not of the calibre openly to dissent from a considered judgment of the Great Lady. But to the amazement of men and doubtless of gods, for once in a way her opinion was publicly challenged.

You could have heard a pin drop in that room when the occupant of the breakfast table took up the gage.

"Fitz is a bad hat." Joseph Jocelyn De Vere removed his pipe from his lips. "Everybody knows it. But Mrs. Fitz is a thousand times too good for the cove that's married her."

Such an expression of opinion left his sister open-

mouthed. Mary Catesby lowered her chin and her eyelashes at an indiscretion so portentous.

"The Fitzwarens," said the great authority, "are a very old family, and Nevil has the education, if not the instincts, of a gentleman, but as for this circus rider he has brought from Vienna, she has neither the birth, the education nor the instincts of a lady."

This tremendous pronouncement would have put most people out of action at once. But here was a man of mettle.

"She's tophole," said that Bayard. "I've never seen her equal. If you ask my opinion there's not a chap in the Hunt who is fit to open a gate for Mrs. Fitz."

The young fellow had fairly got the bit between his teeth and no mistake.

"One doesn't ask your opinion, Joseph," said Mary Catesby, with a bluntness that would have felled a bullock. "Why should one, pray? I know no person less fitter to express an opinion on any subject."

"I've followed her line anyhow, and I've been proud to follow it. She can ride cunning, too, mind you. I've never seen her equal anywhere, and don't suppose I ever shall."

"No one questions her riding. She was born and bred in a circus. But a more unmitigated female bounder never jumped through a hoop in pink tights."

It was below the belt, and not only Jodey but Brasset, who, inefficient as he is in most things, is unmistakably a sportsman of the first class, also felt it to be so.

"Mrs. Fitz has foreign ways," said the noble Master,

"but she can be as nice as anybody when she likes. I've known her be awfully civil."

"She is not without charm," said I, feeling that it was up to me to play up a bit.

"She's *it*," said Jodey. "She's the sort of woman that would make a chap——"

"Shoot himself," chirrupped the noble Master.

Disgust and indignation are mild terms to apply to Mrs. Catesby's wrath.

"Pair of boobies! You are as bad as he is, Reggie. But it was always so like your poor mother to take things lying down."

"Oh, come now, Mrs. Catesby, haven't I said all along that she had no right to hit me over the head with her crop?"

"The saftest place in which to hit you, anyway." The Great Lady was in peril of losing her temper.

The question of Mrs. Fitz was a very vexed one in the Crackanthorpe Hunt. It had already divided that proud institution into two sections; *i.e.*, the thick and thin supporters of that lady and those who would not have her at any price. It need excite no remark in the minds of the judicious, that the male followers of the Hunt, almost to a man, admired as much as they dared in the circumstances, a very remarkable personality; while its feminine patrons with a unanimity quite without precedent in that august body, were conspiring to humiliate as deeply as it lay in their power, a personage who had set three counties by the ears.

The Great Lady proceeded to temper her wrath with some extremely dignified pathos.

"It is a mystery to me," said she, "how men who call themselves gentlemen can attempt to defend a creature who offered a public affront to the Duke and dear Evelyn."

"I presume you mean the affair of the bazaar?" said I.

"I do; a lamentable fracas. Dear Evelyn never left her bed for a fortnight."

"Dear me! Are we to understand that actual physical violence was offered to her Grace?"

"Don't be childish, Odo! I was present and saw everything, and I can answer for it that no such thing as violence was used."

"Then why did the great lady take to her bed?"

"Through sheer vexation. And really one doesn't wonder. It was nothing less than a public insult."

"Tell me, Mary, precisely in three words what did happen at the bazaar. All the world agrees that it was a desperate affair, yet nobody seems to know exactly what it was that occurred."

Mrs. Catesby enveloped herself in that mantle of high diplomacy that she is pleased so often to assume.

"No, my dear Odo, I don't think it would be kind to the Duke and dear Evelyn to say actually what *did* occur. To my mind it is not a thing to be spoken of, but I may tell you this—it has been mentioned at Windsor!"

It was clear from the Great Lady's demeanour that at this announcement we were all expected to cross ourselves. Only Mrs. Arbuthnot did so, however.

"Oh, Mary!" The china blue eyes swam with ecstasy.

"If you wish to convey to us, my dear Mary," said I,

"that a royal commission has been appointed to inquire into the subject, all experience tends to teach that there will be less prospect than ever of finding out what happened at the bazaar."

"Tell us what really did happen at the bazaar, Mrs. Catesby," said Brasset. "I am sorry I wasn't there."

"No, Reggie, I am *much* too fond of dear Evelyn to disclose the truth to a living soul. But I may tell you this. The incident was far worse than has been reported."

"I understand," said I, solemnly lying, at the instance of the histrionic sense, "that Windsor earnestly desired that the incident, whatever it was, should be minimised as much as possible."

The bait was gobbled, hook and all.

"How did you come to hear that, Odo? Even *I* was not told that."

"Who told you *that*, Odo?" Mrs. Arbuthnot twittered breathlessly.

"There was a rumour the other day in the House."

"The idle gossip of the lobbies," the Great Lady was moved to affirm.

But we were straying away from the point. And the point was, in what manner was public decency to mark its sense of outrage at the conduct of Mrs. Fitz.

CHAPTER IV

THE MIDDLE COURSE

Although so many conflicting rumours were abroad as to the unparalleled affront that had been offered to the Strawberry Leaf—some accounts had it that "Dear Evelyn" had been called "a cat" within the hearing of the Mayor and other civic dignitaries of Middleham, while others were pleased to affirm that she had had her ears boxed before the eyes of the horrified reporter for the *Advertiser*—there was the implicit word of Brasset that he had been subjected not only to unchaste expressions in a foreign tongue, but had actually been in receipt of physical violence in his honourable endeavour to uphold the dignity and the discipline of the Crackanthorpe Hunt.

I hope and believe I am a lenient judge of the offences of others—fellow occupants of our local bench delight to tell me so—but even I was so imbued with the spirit of the meeting as to allow that some kind of official notice ought to be taken of the outrageous conduct of Mrs. Nevil Fitzwaren. From the first hour of her appearance among us, a short fifteen months ago, she had gathered the storm clouds of controversy about her. Almost as soon as she appeared out cubbing, she became the most discussed person in the shire. Her ways were un-

mistakably foreign and "unconventional;" and certainly, in the saddle and out of it her personality can only be described as a little overpowering.

In the beginning it may have been Fitz himself who contributed as much as anything to the notoriety of his continental wife. Five years before, the only surviving son of a disreputable father had let the house of his ancestors in a state of gross disrepair, together with the paternal acres, to a City magnate, and betook himself, Heaven alone knew where. Wise people, however, were more than willing that the President of the Destinies should retain the sole and exclusive possession of this information. Nobody had the least desire to know where Fitz the Younger, unmistakable scion of a somewhat deplorable dynasty, was to be found, except perhaps, a few London tradesmen, who, if wise men, would be sparing of their tears. They might have been hit so much harder than proved to be the case. Wherever Fitz had gone, those who knew most of him and the stock from which he sprang, devoutly hoped that there he would stay.

For five years we knew him not. And then one fine September afternoon he turned up at the Grange with a motor car and a French chauffeur and a foreign wife. It may not seem kind to say so, but in the interests of this strange but over-true tale, it is well to state clearly that his return was highly disconcerting to all sections of the community. His name was still an offence in the ears of an obsequious and by no means over-censorious countryside. Rural England is astonishingly lenient

"to Squoire and his relations," but Master Nevil had proved too stiff a proposition even for its forbearance.

Howbeit, Fitz had hardly been a week at his ancestral home with his foreign wife and his motor car when there began to be signs of a rise in Fitzwaren stock. It was bruited abroad that he was paying his debts, fulfilling long neglected obligations, that he had given up the bowl, and that, in a word, he was doing his best to clear a pretty black record. Indeed, the upward tendency of the Fitzwaren stock was so well maintained, that it was decided by the Committee for the Maintenance of the Public Decency that the august Mrs. Catesby should call on his wife and so pave the way for the *entente.* After all, the Fitzwarens were the Fitzwarens, and our revered Vicar—the hardest riding parson in five Counties—clinched the matter with the most opposite quotation from Holy Writ in which he has ever indulged.

The august Mrs. Catesby bore the olive branch in the form of a couple of pieces of pasteboard to the Grange in due course; Mrs. Arbuthnot, the Vicar's wife, Laura Glendinning, and the rank and file of the custodians of the public decency followed suit; and such an atmosphere of the best type of Christian magnanimity prevailed, that it was quite on the *tapis* that "dear Evelyn" herself, the Perpetual President and Past Grand Mistress of this strenuous society, would shoot a card at the Grange. To shew that this is not the idle gossip of an empty tale, there is Mrs. Catesby's own declaration, made in Mrs. Arbuthnot's own drawing-room in the presence of Laura Glendinning and the Vicar's wife, "that had Mrs. Fitz only been presented she

was in a position to know that dear Evelyn would have called upon her."

That was the hour in which the Fitzwaren stock touched its zenith. Thenceforward there was a fall in price. Nevertheless, it was agreed that Fitz was a reformed character. A glass of beer for luncheon, a glass of wine for dinner, and a maximum of three whiskies and sodas *per diem;* handsome indemnity paid to the daughter of the landlord of the Fitzwaren Arms; propitiation galore to persons of all degrees and shades of opinion; appearance with the ducal party at the Cockfoster shoot; regular attendance at Church every Sunday forenoon. Fitz made the pace so hot that the wise declared it could not possibly last. They were wrong, however, as the wise are occasionally. Fitz had more staying power than friends and neighbours were prepared to concede to the son of his father. But in spite of all this, once the slump set in, it continued steadily.

Those who had known Fitz before the reformation were not slow to believe that it was no strength of the inner nature that had rendered him a vessel of grace. It was excessively creditable, of course to the black sheep of the fold, but the whole merit of the reclamation belonged not to the prodigal, but to the nondescript lady from the continent who had not been presented at Court. The depth of Fitz's infatuation for that unconventional creature was really grotesque.

To the merely masculine intelligence it would have seemed that an influence so beneficient over one so besmirched as poor Fitz must have counted to that lady for righteousness on the high court scale. But the Com-

mittee for the Maintenance of the Public Decency came to quite another conclusion. The mere male cannot do better than give *in extenso* the Committee's report upon the matter, and for the text of this judicial pearl our thanks are due to the august Mrs. Catesby.

"If she had been Anybody," that great and good woman announced, "one would have felt it only right to encourage Nevil Fitzwaren in his praiseworthy effort, but as dear Evelyn has been informed, on unimpeachable authority, that she used to ride bare-back in a circus in Vienna, it is quite clear that the wretched fellow is in the toils of an infatuation."

After this finding by the Committee, holders of Fitzwaren stock unloaded quickly. Yet there were some of these spectators who were loth to take that course. Fitz, the harum-scarum, with his nails trimmed, was a less picturesque figure than the provincial Don Juan; but there were those who were not slow to aver that the fair *equestrienne* he had had the audacity to import from Vienna, was quite the most romantic figure that had ever hunted with the Crackanthorpe Hounds.

Doubtless she had been born in a stable and reared upon mare's milk, but to behold her mounted upon the strain of the Godolphin Arabian, in a tall hat, military gauntlets and a scarlet coat was a spectacle that few beholders were able to forget. In the opinion of the Committee, there can be no doubt whatever that it hastened the end of the Dowager. The old lady drove to the meet at the Cross Roads, behind her fat old ponies and her fat old coachman John Timmins, in the full enjoyment of all her faculties, with a shrewd wit,

an easy conscience and a good appetite, took one glance at Mrs. Nevil Fitzwaren, told John Timmins in a hoarse whisper to go home immediately; had a stroke before she arrived, and passed away without regaining consciousness, in the presence of her spiritual, her medical and legal advisers.

In the inflamed state of the public mind, it was necessary that persons of moderate views should be wary. I had seen Mrs. Fitz out hunting, and in this place I am open to confess that I was sealed of the tribe of her admirers. Not from the athletic standpoint merely, but from the æsthetic one. Quite a young woman with superb black eyes and a forest of raven hair, a skin of lustrous olive, a nose and chin of extraordinary decision and character, a more imperiously challenging personality I cannot remember to have seen. Professional Viennese *equestriennes* are doubtless a race apart. They may be accustomed to exact homage from their world which in ours is reserved more or less for the "dear Evelyns" and their compeers. But the gaze of this haughty queen of the sawdust, when she condescended to exert it, was the most direct and arresting thing that ever exacted tribute from the English male or fluttered the dovecotes of the scandalised English female. Her "what-pray-are-you-doing-on-the-earth?" air was so vital that it sent a thrill through the veins. Small wonder was it that the hapless Fitz had struggled so gamely to pull himself together. She was a woman to make a man or mar him. As Fitz was marred already, the sphere of her activities were limited accordingly.

Like most men of moderate views, at heart I own to

being a bit of a coward. At any rate it would have taken a wild horse to drag the admission from me that I was an out and out admirer of The Stormy Petrel, as with rare felicity the vicar of the parish had christened her. For by this time our little republic was cloven in twain. There were the Mrs. Fitzites, her humble admirers and willing slaves, whose sex you will easily guess; and there were the Anti-Mrs. Fitzites, ruthless adversaries who had sworn to have her blood, or failing that, since Atalanta was an amazon indeed, to make the place so hot for her, that in the words of my friend Mrs. Josiah P. Perkins, "she would have to quit."

How to dislodge her, that was the problem for the ladies of the Crackanthorpe Hunt. It was in the quest of a solution that the illustrious Mrs. Catesby had honoured us with a morning call.

"Odo Arbuthnot," said that notable woman, "it is my intention to speak plainly. Mrs. Fitz must leave the neighbourhood. We look to you, as a married man, a father of a family and a county member, to devise a means for her removal."

"Issue a writ," said I. "That seems the most straightforward course. If our assaulted and battered friend, Brasset, will swear an information, I shall be glad to sign the warrant."

"Do you think she could be taken to prison?" said Mrs. Arbuthnot, hopefully.

"Don't attempt to beg the question." The Great Lady was not to be diverted from the scent. "Be more manly. We expect public spirit from you. Certainly this business is extremely disagreeable, but it does not

excuse your pusillanimity. To my mind, your attitude all along has suggested that you are trying to run with the hare and to hunt with the hounds."

This was a terrible home-thrust for a confirmed lover of the middle-course. I hope I am not wholly lacking in spirit, but such a charge was not easy to rebut. While I assumed a statesmanlike part, if only to gain a little time in which to cover my exposed position, my relation by marriage with a daring which was certainly remarkable in one who is not by nature a thruster, took up the cudgels yet again.

"If I were you, Odo," said he, "I should let 'em do their own dirty work."

I felt Mary Catesby's glance flash past me like the lightning of heaven.

"Dirty work, Joseph. I demand an explanation."

"I call it dirty," said that gladiator. "I like things straightforrard myself. If you think a cove is askin' for trouble hand it out to him personally. Don't set on others."

Before the woman of impregnable virtue to whom this gem of morality was addressed, could visit the Bayard at the breakfast table according to his merit, we found ourselves suddenly precipitated into the realms of drama.

For this was the moment in which I became aware that Parkins was hovering about my chair and that a sensational announcement was on his lips.

"Mr. Fitzwaren desires to see you, sir, on most urgent business."

The effect was electrical. Mary Catesby suspended

her indictment with a gesture like Boadicea's, queenly but ferocious. Brasset's pink perplexity approximated to a shade of green; the eyes of the Madam were like moons—in the circumstances a little poetic license is surely to be pardoned—while as for the demeanour of the narrator of this ower true tale, I can answer for it that it was one of total discomfiture.

"Mr. Fitzwaren here?" were my first incredulous words.

"I have shewn him into the library, sir," said Parkins solemnly.

"You cannot see him, Odo," said the despot of our household. "He must not come here."

"Important business, Parkins?" said I.

"Most *urgent* business, sir."

"Highly mysterious!" Mrs. Catesby was pleased to affirm.

Highly mysterious the coming of Nevil Fitzwaren certainly was. A moment's reflection convinced me of the need of appeasing the general curiosity. I took my way to the library with many speculations rising in my mind. Nothing was further from my expectation than to be consulted by Nevil Fitzwaren on urgent business.

CHAPTER V

ABOUNDS IN SENSATION

ASTONISHED as I was by the coming of such a visitor, the appearance and the manner of that much-discussed personage did nothing to lessen my interest.

I found him pacing the room in a state of agitation. His face was haggard, his eyes were bloodshot, he was unkempt and almost piteous to look upon. And yet more strangely his open overcoat which his distress could not suffer to keep buttoned, disclosed a rumpled shirt front, a tie askew and a dinner jacket which evidently had been donned the evening before.

"Hallo, Fitz," said I, as unconcernedly as I could.

He did not answer me but immediately closed the door of the room. Somehow, the action gave me a thrill.

"There is no possibility of our being overheard?" he said in a hoarse whisper.

"None whatever. Let me help you off with your coat. Then sit down in that chair next the fire and have a drink."

"Fitz submitted, doubtless under a sense of compulsion. My four years' seniority at school had generally enabled me to get my way with him. It was rather painful to witness the effort the unfortunate fellow put forth to pull himself together; and when I measured

out a pretty stiff brandy and soda his refusal of it was distinctly poignant.

"I oughtn't to have it, old chap," he said with his wild eyes looking into mine like those of a dumb animal. "It doesn't do, you know."

"Drink it straight off at once," said I, "and do as you are told."

Fitz did so with reluctance. The effect upon him was what I had not foreseen. His haggard wildness yielded quite suddenly to an outburst of tears. He covered his face with his hands and wept in a painfully overwrought manner.

I waited in silence for this outburst to pass.

"I've been scouring the country since nine o'clock last night," he said, "and I feel like going out of my mind."

"What's the trouble, old son?" said I, taking a chair beside him.

"They've got my wife."

"Whom do you mean by 'they'?"

"I can't, I mustn't tell you," said Fitz excitedly, "but they have got her, and—and I expect she is dead by now."

Words as wild as these to the accompaniment of that overwrought demeanour suggested an acute form of mental disturbance only too clearly.

"You had better tell me everything," said I persuasively. "Perhaps I might be able to help a little. Two heads are better than one, you know."

I must confess that I had no great hope of being able to help the unlucky fellow very materially, but

somewhat to my surprise he answered in a perfectly rational manner.

"I have come here with the intention of telling you everything. I must have help and you are the only friend I've got."

"One of many," said I, lying cordially.

"It's true," said Fitz. "The only one. Like that chap in the Bible, the hand of every man is against me. I deserve it; I know I've not played the game; but now I must have somebody to stand by me and I've come to you."

"Well," said I, "that is no more than you would do by me in similar circumstances."

"You don't mean that," said Fitz with an expression of keen misery. "But you are a genuine chap, all the same."

"Let's hear the trouble."

"The trouble is this," said Fitz, and as he spoke the look of wildness returned to his eyes. "My wife went in the car to do some shopping at Middleham at three o'clock yesterday afternoon expecting to be back at five, and neither she nor the car has returned."

"And nothing has been heard of her?"

"Not a word."

"Had she a chauffeur?"

"Yes, a Frenchman of the name of Moins whom we picked up in Paris."

"I suppose you have communicated with the police?"

"No; you see the whole affair must be kept as dark as possible."

"They are certainly the people to help you, particularly if you have reason to suspect foul play."

"There is every reason to suspect it. I am afraid she is already beyond the help of the police."

"Why should you think that?"

Fitz hesitated. His distraught air was very painful.

"Arbuthnot," said he, slowly and reluctantly, "before I tell you everything I must pledge you to absolute secrecy. Other lives, other interests, more important than yours and mine are involved in this."

I gave the pledge, and in so doing was impressed by a depth of responsibility in the manner of my visitor, of which I should hardly have expected it to be capable.

"Did you see in the papers last evening, that there had been an attempt on the life of the King of Illyria?"

"I read it in this morning's paper."

"It will surprise you to learn," said Fitz, striving for a calmness he could not achieve, "that my wife is the only child of Ferdinand XII, King of Illyria. She is therefore, Crown Princess and Heiress Apparent to the oldest monarchy in Europe."

"It certainly *does* surprise me," was the only rejoinder that for the moment I could make.

"I want help and I want advice; I feel that I hardly dare do anything on my own initiative. You see it is most important that the world at large should know nothing of this."

"Why, may I ask?"

"There are two parties at war in Illyria. There is the King's party, the supporters of the monarchy, and there is the Republican party, which has made three

attempts on the life of Ferdinand XII and two on that of his daughter."

"But I assume, my dear fellow, that the whereabouts in England of the Crown Princess are known to her father the King?"

"No; and it is essential that he should remain in ignorance. Our elopement from Illyria was touch and go. Ferdinand has moved heaven and earth to find out where she is, because she has been formally betrothed to a Russian Grand Duke, and if she does not return to Blaenau he will not be able to secure the succession."

"Depend upon it," said I, "the Crown Princess is on the way to Blaenau. Not of her own free will of course. But his Majesty's agents have managed to play the trick."

"You may be right, Arbuthnot. But one thing is certain; my poor brave Sonia will never return to Blaenau alive."

Fitz buried his face in his hands tragically.

"She promised that, you know, in case anything of this kind happened, and I consented to it." The simplicity of his utterance had in it a certain grandeur which few would have expected to find in a man with the reputation of Nevil Fitzwaren. "Everybody doesn't believe in this sort of thing, Arbuthnot, but I and my princess do. She will never lie in the arms of another. God help her, brave and noble and unlucky soul!"

This was not the Fitz the world had always known. I suddenly recalled the flaxen-haired, odd, intense, somewhat twisted, wholly unhappy creature who had ren-

dered me willing service in our boyhood. I had always enjoyed the reputation in our house at school that I alone, and none other, could manage Fitz. I recalled his passion for the "Morte d'Arthur," his angular vehemence, his sombre docility. In those distant days I had felt there was something in him; and now in what seemed curiously poignant circumstances there came the fulfilment of the prophecy.

"Let us assume, my dear fellow," said I, making an attempt to be of practical use in a situation of almost ludicrous difficulty, "that it is not her father who has abducted the Princess Sonia. Let us take it to be the other side, the Republican party."

"It would still mean death; not by her own hand, but by theirs. They twice attempted her life in Blaenau."

"In any case, it is reasonably clear that not a moment is to be lost if we are to help her."

"I don't know what to do," said Fitz, "and that's the truth."

I confessed that I too had no very clear idea of the course of action. It occurred to me that the wisest thing to be done was to take a third person into our counsels.

"You ask my advice," said I; "it seems to me that the best thing to do is to see if Coverdale will help us."

"That will mean publicity. At all costs I feel that that must be avoided."

"Coverdale is a shrewd fellow. He will know what to do; he is a man you can trust; and he will be able to set the proper machinery in motion."

My insistence on the point, and Fitz's unwilling recognition of the need for a desperate remedy, goaded him into a half-hearted consent. In my own mind I was persuaded of the value of Coverdale's advice, in whatever it might consist. He was the head of the police in our shire, and apart from a little external pomposity, without which one is given to understand it is hardly possible for a Chief Constable to play the part, he was a shrewd and kindhearted fellow, who knew a good deal about things in general.

Poor Fitz would listen to no suggestion of food. Therefore I ordered the car round at once, and incidentally informed the ruler of the household and the expectant assembly by whom she was surrounded, that Fitz and I had some private business to transact which required our immediate presence in the city of Middleham.

"Odo," said she whose word is law, with a mien of dark suspicion, "if Nevil Fitzwaren is persuading you to lend him money, I forbid you to entertain the idea. You are really so weak in such matters. You have really no idea of the value of money."

"It will do you no good with your constituents either," said Mary Catesby, "to be seen in Middleham with Nevil Fitzwaren."

To these warning voices I turned deaf ears, and fled from the room in a fashion so precipitate that it suggested guilt.

No time was lost in setting forth. As we glided past the front of the house, I at least was uncomfortably conscious of a battery of hostile eyes in ambush behind

the window panes. There could be no doubt that every detail of our going was duly marked. Heaven knew what theories were being propounded! Yet whatever shape they assumed I was sure that all the ingenuity in the world would not hit the truth. No feat of pure imagination was likely to disclose what the business really was that had caused me to be identified in this open and flagrant manner with the husband of the luckless circus rider from Vienna.

CHAPTER VI

EXPERT OPINION

Every mile of the eight to Middleham, Fitz was as gloomy as the grave. In spite of the confidence he had been led to repose in my judgment, he seemed wholly unable to extend it to that of Coverdale. He had a morbid dread of the police and of the publicity that would invest any dealings with them. The preservation of his wife's incognito was undoubtedly a matter of paramount importance.

It was half-past twelve when we reached Middleham. We were lucky enough to find Coverdale at his office at the sessions hall.

"Well, what can I do for you?" said the Chief Constable, heartily.

"You can do a great deal for us, Coverdale," said I. "But the first thing we shall ask you to do is to forget that you are an official. We come to you in your capacity of a personal friend. In that capacity we seek any advice you may feel able or disposed to give us. But before we give you any information, we should like to have your assurance that you will treat the whole matter as being told to you in the strictest secrecy."

Coverdale has as active a sense of humour as his

exalted station allows him to sustain. There was something in my mode of address that seemed to appeal to it.

"I will promise that on one condition, Arbuthnot," said he; "which is that you do not seek to involve me in the compounding of a felony."

"Oh, no, no, no, no!" Fitz burst out.

Fitz's exclamation and his tragic face banished the smile that lurked at the corners of Coverdale's lips.

I deemed it best that Fitz should retell the story of his tragedy, and this he did. In the course of his narrative the sweat ran down his face, his hands twitched painfully, and his bloodshot eyes grew so wild that neither Coverdale nor I cared to look at them.

Coverdale sat mute and grave at the conclusion of Fitz's remarkable story. He had swung round in his revolving chair to face us. His legs were crossed and the tips of his fingers were placed together, after the fashion that another celebrity in a branch of his calling is said to affect.

"It's a queer story of yours, Fitzwaren," he said at last. "But the world is full of 'em—what?"

"Help me," said Fitz, piteously. His voice was that of a drowning man.

"I think we shall be able to do that," said Coverdale. He spoke in the soothing tones of a skilful surgeon.

"The first thing to know," said the Chief Constable, "is the number of the car."

"G. Y. 70942 is the number."

Coverdale jotted it down pensively upon his blotting pad.

"Have you a portrait of Mrs. Fitzwaren?" he asked.

"I have this," said Fitz.

In the most natural manner he flung open his overcoat, pulled away his evening tie, tore open his collar and produced from under the rumpled shirt front a locket suspended by a fine gold chain round his neck. It contained a miniature of the Princess, executed in Paris. Both Coverdale and I examined it curiously, but as we did so, I fear our minds had a single thought. It was that Fitz was a little mad.

"Will you entrust it to me?" said Coverdale.

Fitz's indecision was pathetic.

"It's the only one I've got," he mumbled. "I don't suppose I shall ever be able to get another. I ought to have had a replica while I had the chance."

"I undertake to return it within three days," said Coverdale, with a simple kindliness for which I honoured him.

Fitz handed the locket to him impulsively.

"Of course take it, by all means," he said hurriedly. "I know you will take care of it. Fact is, you know, I'm a bit knocked over."

"Naturally, my dear fellow," said Coverdale. "So should we all be. But I shall go up to town this afternoon and have a talk with them at Scotland Yard."

"I was afraid that would have to happen. I wanted it to be kept an absolute secret, you know."

"You can depend upon the Yard to be the soul of discretion. It is not the first time they have been entrusted with the internal affairs of a reigning family. If the Princess is still in this country and she is still

alive, and there is no reason to think otherwise, I believe we shall not have to wait long for news of her."

Coverdale spoke in a tone of calm reassurance, which at least was eloquent of his tact and his knowledge of men. Overwrought as Fitz was, it was not without its effect upon him.

"Ought not the ports to be watched?" he said.

"I hardly think it will be necessary. But if Scotland Yard thinks otherwise, they will be watched of course. Whatever happens, Fitzwaren, you can be quite sure that nothing will be left undone in our endeavour to find out what has really happened to the lady we shall agree to call Mrs. Fitzwaren. Further, you can depend upon it that absolute discretion will be used."

We left Coverdale, imbued with a sense of gratitude for his cordial optimism, and I think we both felt that a peculiarly delicate business could not be in more competent hands. He was a man of sound judgment and infinite discretion. Throughout this singular interview he had emerged as a shrewd, tactful and eminently kind-hearted fellow.

As a result of this visit to the sessions hall at Middleham, poor Fitz allowed himself a little hope. He had been duly impressed by the man of affairs who had taken the case in hand. However, he was still by no means himself. He was still in a strangely excited and gloomy condition; and this was aggravated by his friendlessness and the feeling that the hand of every man was against him.

In the circumstances, I felt obliged to yield to his expressed wish that I should accompany him to the

Grange. As the crow flies it is less than four miles from my house.

The home of the Fitzwarens is a rambling, gloomy and dilapidated place enough. An air pervades it of having run to seed. Every Fitzwaren who has inhabited it within living memory has been a gambler and a *roué* in one form or another. The Fitzwarens are by long odds the oldest family in our part of the world, and by odds equally long their record is the most unfortunate. Coming of a long line of ill-regulated lives, the heavy bills drawn by his forbears upon posterity seemed to have become payable in the person of the unhappy Fitz. Doubtless it was not right that one who in Mrs. Catesby's phrase was a married man, a father of a family and a county member, should constitute himself as the apologist of such a man as Fitz. But in spite of his errors, I had never found it in my heart to act towards him as so many of his neighbours did not hesitate to do. The fact that he had fagged for me at school and the knowledge that there was a lovable, a pathetic and even a heroic side to one to whom fate had been relentlessly cruel, made it impossible for me to regard him as wholly outside the pale.

I can never forget our arrival at the Grange on this piercing winter afternoon. My car belonged to that earlier phase of motoring when the traveller was more exposed to the British climate than modern science considers necessary. The snow, at the beck of a terrible north-easter, beat in our faces pitilessly. And when we came half frozen into the house, we were met on its threshold by a mite of four. She was the image of her

mother, with the same skin of lustrous olive, the same mass of raven hair and the same challenging black eyes. In her hand was a mutilated doll. It was carried upside down and it had been decapitated.

"I want my mama," she said with an air of authority which was ludicrously like that of the circus-rider from Vienna. "Have you brought my mama?"

"No, my pearl of price," said Fitz, swinging the mite up to his snow-covered face, "but she will be here soon. She has sent you this."

He kissed the small elf, who had all the disdain of a princess and the witchery of a fairy.

"Who is dis?" said she, pointing at me with her doll.

"Dis, my jewel of the east, is our kind friend Mr. Arbuthnot. If you are very nice to him he will stay to tea."

"Do you like my mama, Mistah 'Buthnot?" said the latest scion of Europe's oldest dynasty, with a directness which was disconcerting from a person of four.

"Very much indeed," said I warmly.

"You can stay to tea, Mr. 'Buthnot. I like you vewy much."

The prompt cordiality of the verdict was certainly pleasant to a humble unit of a monarchical country. The creature extended her tiny paw with a gesture so superb that there was only one thing left for a courtier to do. That was to kiss it.

The owner of the paw seemed to be much gratified by this discreet action.

"I like you vewy much, Mistah 'Buthnot, I will tell you my name."

"Oh, do, please!"

"My name is Marie Sophia Louisa Waren Fitzwaren."

"Phœbus, *what* a name!"

"And dis, Mistah 'Buthnot, is my guv'ness, Miss Green. She is a tam fool."

The lady thus designated had come unexpectedly upon the scene. An estimable and bespectacled gentlewoman of uncompromising mien, she gazed down upon her charge with the gravest austerity.

"Marie Louisa, if I hear that phrase again you will go to bed."

As Miss Green spoke, however, she gazed at me over her spectacles in a humorously reflective fashion.

Marie Louisa shrugged her small shoulders disdainfully, and in a tone that, to say the least, was peremptory, ordered the butler, who looked venerable enough to be her great-grandfather, to bring the tea. The *congé* that the venerable servitor performed upon receiving this order rendered it clear that upon a day he had been a confidential retainer in the royal house of Illyria.

"I am afraid, Miss Green," said I, tentatively, "that your post is no sinecure."

"That mite of four has the imperious will of a Catherine of Russia," said Miss Green, with an amused smile. "If she ever attains the estate of womanhood, I shudder to think what she will be."

Fitz entreated me to dine with him. I yielded in the hope that a little company might help him to fight his depression. The meal was not a cheerful one. Under

the most favourable conditions Fitz is not a cheerful individual; but I was obliged to note that of late years he had learned to exercise his will. In many ways I thought he had changed for the better. He had lost his coarseness of speech; he was scrupulously moderate in what he ate and drank, and his bearing had gained in reserve and dignity. In a word, he had grown into a more civilised, a more developed being than I had ever thought it possible for him to become.

It was past eleven when I returned to my own domain. The blizzard still prevailed, and I found Mrs. Arbuthnot in the drawing-room enthroned before a roaring fire, which happily served as some mitigation of the arctic demeanour with which my return was greeted. This, in conjunction with the adverse elements through which I had already passed, was enough to complete the overthrow of the strongest constitution.

The ruler of Dympsfield House—Dympsfield House is the picturesque name conferred upon our ancestral home by my grandfather, Mr. George Arbuthnot of Messrs. Arbuthnot, Boyd and Co., the celebrated firm of sugar refiners of Bristol—the ruler of Dympsfield House was ostensibly engaged in the study of a work of fiction of pronounced sporting character, with a yellow cover. Works of this nature and the provincial edition of the *Daily Courier*, which is guaranteed to have a circulation of ten million copies *per diem*, are the only forms of literature that the ruler of Dympsfield House considers it "healthy" to peruse.

When I entered the drawing-room with a free and easy air which was designed to suggest that my con-

science had nothing to conceal and nothing to defend, the wife of my bosom discarded her novel and fixed me with that cool gaze which all who are born Vane-Anstruther consider it to be the hallmark of their caste to wield.

"Where have you been, Odo?" was the greeting that was reserved for me.

"Dining with Fitz," said I, succinctly.

A short pause.

"What did you say?"

I repeated my modest statement.

A snort.

"Upon my word, Odo, I can't think——!"

It called for a nice judgment to know which opening to play.

"Fitz is in trouble," said I.

"Is that very surprising?"

It is difficult to render the true Vane-Anstruther vocal inflections in terms of literary art. A similar problem is presented by the unwavering glint of the china blue eye and the subtle curl of the lip.

"In the sense you wish to convey, *mon enfant*, it *is* surprising. Fitz is one of the poor devils who are by no means so black as they are painted."

A toss of the head.

"Don't forget that I have known Fitz all his life; that we were at school together; and that one way and another, I have seen a good deal of him."

"I wouldn't boast about it, if I were you. The man is a byeword; you know that. It is not kind to me."

I was in mortal fear of tears. That dread accessory

of conjugal life is permitted by the Code De Vere Vane-Anstruther in certain situations. However, although the weather was very heavy, for the time being, that was spared me, and I breathed more freely.

Joseph Jocelyn De Vere Vane-Anstruther, who had a cigarette between his lips, and was lying full length upon a chintz that was charmingly devised in blue and yellow, inquired whether I had mentioned to Fitz the subject of a meeting with the outraged Brasset.

"If the weather don't pick up," said this Corinthian, "we shall go up to town to-morrow, and my pal in Jermyn Street will put Brasset through his facings. With a bit of practice Brasset ought to be able to give Fitz his gruel."

"I fail to see," said I, "why the unfortunate husband should be brought to book for the sins of the wife."

"If you take to yourself a wife," said my relation by marriage, with a didacticism of which he is seldom guilty, "it is for better or for worse; and if your missus overrides the best 'ound in the pack and then 'its the master over the head with her crop because he tells her what he thinks of her, you are looking both ways for trouble."

"It is a hard doctrine," said I.

"If a chap is such a fool as to marry, he must stand to the consequences."

"He must!"

Such a prompt corroboration of the young fellow's reasoning can only be described as sinister. A flash of the china blue eyes came from the vicinity of the hearth rug.

"How did Mrs. Fitz bear herself at the dinner table?" inquired the sharer of my joys. "Did she eat with her knife and drink out of the finger bowls?"

"No, *mon enfant*, I am compelled to say that she did not."

Mrs. Arbuthnot frowned a becoming incredulity.

"You surprise one."

"Perhaps it is not altogether remarkable."

"A matter of opinion, surely."

"Personally, I prefer to regard it as a matter of fact. You see, Mrs. Fitz was not at the dinner table."

"Where was she, may I ask?"

"She had gone up to town."

"And was that why her husband was so upset?"

"There is reason to believe that it was."

"Oh!"

There was great virtue in that exclamation. My amiable coadjutor, as I knew perfectly well, was burning to pursue her inquiries, but her status as a human being did not permit her to proceed farther. There are many advantages incident to the proud condition of a De Vere Vane-Anstruther, but that almost inhuman eminence has its drawbacks also. Chief among them are the limits imposed upon a perfectly natural and healthy curiosity. It is not seemly for a member of that distinguished clan to enter too exhaustively into the affairs of her neighbours.

On the following morning, in spite of the behaviour of the weather, we were favoured by an early visit from Mrs. Catesby. She was in high feather.

"You have heard the news, of course!" she proclaimed

for the benefit of Mrs. Arbuthnot and with an expansion of manner that she does not always permit herself. "Of course Odo has told you what brought Nevil Fitzwaren here yesterday morning."

"Oh no, he hasn't," said Mrs. Arbuthnot, rather aggrievedly.

"Is it conceivable, my dear child, that you have *not* heard the news?"

"I only know, Mary, that Nevil Fitzwaren is in trouble. Odo did not think well to supply the details, and really the affairs of the Fitzwarens interest one so little that one did not feel inclined to inquire."

"The creature has bolted, my dear."

In spite of Mrs. Arbuthnot's determination to take no interest in the affairs of the Fitzwarens, she was not proof against this melodramatic announcement.

"Bolted, Mary!"

"Bolted, child. And with whom do you suppose?"

"One would say with the chauffeur," hazarded Mrs. Arbuthnot promptly.

Mrs. Catesby's countenance fell. She made no attempt to dissemble her disappointment.

"Then Odo *has* told you after all."

"Not a syllable, I assure you, Mary. But I am certain that if Mrs. Fitz has bolted with anybody, it must have been with the chauffeur."

"How clever of you, my dear child!" The Great Lady's admiration was open and sincere. "Such a right feeling about things! She has certainly bolted with the chauffeur."

"Odo," said Mrs. Arbuthnot, triumphant yet imperious, "why didn't you tell me all this?"

"*Mon enfant*," said I in the mellowest tones of which I am master, "you gave me clearly to understand that the affairs of the Fitzwarens had no possible interest for you."

Mrs. Arbuthnot went to the length of biting her lip. By withholding such a sensational bit of news, I had been guilty of an unheard-of outrage upon human nature. But she could not deny my plea of justification.

"Nevil Fitzwaren is far luckier than he deserves to be," said the Great Lady. "It is a merciful dispensation that dear Evelyn did not actually call upon her. I feel sure she would have done, had I not implored her not to be hasty."

"But, Mary, I was under the impression that you called upon her yourself."

"So I did, Odo. But that was merely out of respect for the memory of Nevil's mother. Besides, it was only right that somebody should see what her home was like."

"What was it like, Mary?" said I.

Mrs. Catesby compressed her lips.

"I ask you, Mary. You alone sacrificed yourself upon the altar of public decency; you alone are in possession of the grim facts."

"Let us be charitable, my dear Odo. After all, what can one expect of a person from a continental circus?"

"What indeed!" was my pious objuration.

"There is only one thing, I fear, for Nevil to do

now," said the Great Lady. "He must get a divorce and marry his cook."

The august matron denied us the honour of her company at luncheon. She was due at the Vicarage. And there was reason to believe that she would drink tea at the Priory and dine at the Castle. It was so necessary that the joyful tidings of the Divine justice that had overtaken the wicked should be spread abroad.

CHAPTER VII

COVERDALE'S REPORT

In the afternoon I rode over to the Grange to learn if there was any news and to see how Fitz was bearing up. He was certainly doing uncommonly well. His face was less haggard, his eyes were not so wild, while a change of linen and a razor had helped his appearance considerably.

Coverdale had telegraphed to say that the car had been traced to a garage in Regent Street, and that before long he hoped to be in possession of further information.

Fitz seemed to regard the finding of the car as a favourable omen. At least his emotions were under far better control than on the previous day. His manner was no longer overwrought, and he was able to take a more practical view of the situation.

He promised to keep me informed of any fresh development; and I left him without misgiving. He seemed much more fit to cope with events than when I had left him the night before.

It was in the afternoon of the following day that I saw Fitz again. It happened that I was just about to set out from my own door when he drove up in a dog-cart. He was accompanied by Coverdale.

Fitz has a curiously mobile countenance. It is quick to advertise the fleeting emotions of its owner. This afternoon there was a light in his eye and a look of resolution and alertness about him which said that news had come, and that whatever its nature, Nevil Fitzwaren was not prepared to submit tamely to fate.

"I was on the point of coming to see you," I explained as I led them in.

The presence of Coverdale seemed to indicate an important development. It would have been difficult, however, to deduce so much from the bearing of the Chief Constable. He is such a discreet and sagacious individual, that no amount of special information is capable of detracting from or adding to his habitual air of composed importance.

My visitors were supplied with a little sustenance in a liquid form before I asked for the news; and then in answer to my demand Fitz called upon Coverdale to put me *au fait* with the latest information.

It appeared that Coverdale had hastened to take Scotland Yard into his confidence, and that that famous organisation had been able in a surprisingly short space of time to shed a light upon the mysterious disappearance of Mrs. Fitz.

"She has been traced to the Illyrian Embassy in Portland Place," said Coverdale.

"Indeed!" said I. "In that case we can congratulate you, Fitz, that she is likely to come by no harm in that dignified seclusion."

"Yes, that aspect of the affair is decidedly favourable," said Coverdale. "But as far as the Commissioner

is able to learn, the lady is to all intents and purposes being held a close prisoner."

"A very singular state of things, surely."

"Decidedly singular. But there can be no doubt that the Illyrian Ambassador is acting upon strict instructions from his Sovereign."

"He must be a pretty cool hand, to kidnap the wife of an Englishman in this country in the broad light of day, and the monarch for whom he acts strikes one also as being a pretty cool customer."

Coverdale laughed. He knocked the ash off the end of his cigar with an air of reflective enjoyment.

"Kings are kings in Illyria," said he. "Saving the presence of the son-in-law of Ferdinand the Twelfth, his Majesty is no believer in this damned constitutional nonsense. He has his own ideas and his own little way of carrying them out."

"He has, apparently. But unfortunately for Ferdinand the Twelfth and fortunately for his son-in-law, Fitz, we in this country are rather decided believers in this damned constitutional nonsense. I daresay, Coverdale, your friend the Commissioner will be able to put his Illyrian Majesty right upon the point."

The stealthy air of enjoyment that was hovering about Coverdale's rubicund visage seemed to deepen.

"You'd think so, wouldn't you?" he said, with a cheerful puff, "but it seems it is not quite so easy as you'd suppose."

I confessed to surprise.

"You see, Arbuthnot, even in a country like ours, kings are entitled to a measure of respect. The reign-

ing family of Illyria—under the favour of our distinguished friend—" the Chief Constable bowed to Fitz with a solemn unction that to my mind was indescribably comic, "has ties of blood with nearly all the royal houses of Europe; the Illyrian Embassy is by no means a negligible quantity at the Court of Saint James, for if Illyria is not very large it is devilish well connected; and again, as the Commissioner assures me, an embassy is sacred earth which lies outside his jurisdiction."

"He seems to have come up against rather a tough proposition."

"He is the first to admit it. Here we have a flagrant outrage committed upon the personal property of a law-abiding Englishman, under his own vine and fig-tree, in his own little country; the perpetrators of the outrage sit unconcerned in Portland Place; yet there seems to be no machinery in this admirably governed and highly constitutional island which can redress this flagrant hardship."

"But surely, Coverdale, a way can be found?"

"The Commissioner declined point-blank to undertake anything on his own responsibility. Accordingly we went to the Foreign Office and had an interview with an Official. The Official didn't seem to know what the practice of the Office was in such cases, for the simple reason that it was the first time that the Office appeared to have acquired any practice in them. But upon one point he was perfectly clear. It was that the Commissioner would do well to return without delay to his fingermarks and his photographs of notorious criminals,

and contrive to forget that 'L'Affaire Fitz' had been brought to his notice."

"But that is absurd."

"That is how the matter stands at all events," said Coverdale with an air of detachment.

"Did the Official confer with the Minister?"

"Yes; and the Minister conferred with the Official; and their joint wisdom amounted to this: if a British subject indulges in the luxury of a Ferdinand the Twelfth for a father-in-law, he must refer to God any little differences that may arise between them, because the law of England does not contemplate and declines to take cognisance of these domesticities."

"It is incredible!"

"I agree with you, Arbuthnot; and yet if you look at the matter in all its bearings, it is difficult to see what other conclusion could have been arrived at. The whole affair bristles with difficulties. There is no specific evidence that the Crown Princess of Illyria is actually in need of aid. Although many of the details of her flight from Blaenau five years ago are known to the Foreign Office, it is in complete ignorance of the fact that she was in residence in this country. And again the whole thing is far too delicate to risk a fall with the Illyrian Ambassador."

"Certainly the national horror of looking foolish appears to justify the F.O. in the *rôle* of Agag. But in my humble judgment its masterly inactivity is desperately hard on a British subject."

"Well," said Coverdale, having recourse to the plain

man's philosophy, "if a British subject will indulge in a Ferdinand the Twelfth for a father-in-law!"

During our extremely piquant discussion—to me it was certainly that, however tame and flat it may appear in the bald prose in which it is now invested—the person most affected by it was a study in sombre self-repression. He spoke not a word, he hardly indulged in a gesture; yet his whole bearing had significance. And when at last the time came for him to speak, he used a quiet deliberation as though every word had been sought out and weighed beforehand.

"There is only one thing to be done," he said. "As the law won't help me, I must help the law."

Not only in its substance, but also in the manner of its delivery, such an announcement was entirely worthy of the son-in-law of Ferdinand the Twelfth.

I saw the rather amused uplift of Coverdale's eyebrows, but knowing the unusual calibre of the speaker, I felt instinctively that at this stage a display of scepticism would be out of place. Fitz was quite capable of helping the law of England, if he really felt that it required his assistance.

"I can't thank you, Coverdale," he said simply. "You have done for me what I can't repay. This applies to you also, Arbuthnot. I shall never forget what you've done for me. But now I am going to ask you both as fellow Englishmen, with wives and children of your own, to stand by me while I try to get fair play."

Such words affected us both.

"You can certainly count upon me for what I may be worth," said I, "but frankly, my dear fellow, I fail

to see what you can do in face of the Foreign Office decree."

"I shall play Ferdinand at his own game and beat him at it, as I've done before to-day."

It was a vaunt that Fitz was entitled to make. The elopement from Blaenau must have been the work of a bold and resourceful man.

"Of one thing I am convinced," Fitz proceeded; "there is not an hour to lose. My wife may be taken back to Blaenau at any moment. I am confident that von Arlenberg, the Ambassador, has orders from Ferdinand. If I am to save the life of Sonia, I must act without delay."

Coverdale nodded his head in silence, while I felt a pang of dismay. The argument was clear enough, but Fitz's impotence in the presence of events made him a figure for pity.

His demeanour, however, betrayed no consciousness of this. In those strange eyes there was a purpose, and something had entered his voice.

"I want half a dozen *good* fellows—sportsmen—to stand by me. You are one, Arbuthnot. You too, Coverdale. You will stand by me, eh?"

The Chief Constable looked a little uneasy. To the official mind such a request was decidedly ambiguous, not to say uncomfortable.

"I should be glad, Fitzwaren," said he, "if you will tell me precisely what responsibilities I shall incur if I pledge myself to this course."

"It depends on circumstances," said Fitz. "But if I find my back to the wall, as I daresay I shall before

I am through with this business, I should like to have at my elbow a few men I can trust."

"So long as you don't depute me to throw a bomb into the Embassy!" said Coverdale.

Fitz's scheme for the recovery of his lawful property was not so drastic as that, yet when it came to be unfolded, it was somewhat of a nature to give pause to a pair of Englishmen converging upon middle age, pledged especially to observe the law.

"I intend to have her out of Portland Place. She must come away to-morrow. There is not an hour to lose. But I must find a few pals who are good at need, because it won't be child's play, you know."

"It certainly won't be child's play," agreed the Chief Constable, "if it is your intention to break into the Illyrian Embassy and seize the Crown Princess by force."

"There is no help for it," said Fitz quietly.

Coverdale grew thoughtful. It was tolerably clear that Fitz was contemplating an act of open violence; and as a breach of the peace must at all times be construed as a breach of the law, it was scarcely for him to aid and abet him. At heart, nevertheless, the worthy Chief Constable was a downright, honest, foursquare, genuine fellow. He did not say as much, but there was something in his manner which implied that he had come to the conclusion that those repositories of justice, national and international, Scotland Yard and the Foreign Office, were conniving at a frank injustice to a fellow Briton.

"It is a hard case," said Coverdale; "and in the cir-

cumstances I don't altogether see how you can be blamed if you take reasonable steps to recover your property."

"In other words, Coverdale," said I, "you are prepared to countenance the raid on the Illyrian Embassy?"

The Chief Constable laughed.

"I don't say that exactly. And yet, after all, this is a free country; and if a parcel of damned foreigners bagged my wife, and the law could afford me no redress, I'm afraid, I'm sadly afraid——"

"It would be 'Up Guards and at 'em'?"

"Upon my word, Arbuthnot, I'm not sure it wouldn't."

"Thank you, Coverdale," said Fitz. "And I take it that both of you will go up to London with me to-morrow."

"What do you ask us precisely to do?"

"Leave the details to me"—Fitz's air was that of a staff officer. "You can trust me not to go out of my way to look for trouble. But it is not much use for one man singlehanded to attempt to force his way into the Illyrian Embassy for the purpose of effecting the rescue of the Crown Princess."

"It would be suicidal for one man to attempt it," we agreed.

"What is the minimum of assistance you will require?" said I.

"Half a dozen stout fellows ought to be able to manage it comfortably. There's Coverdale and you and me. If I can enlist three others between now and to-morrow, the thing is as good as done."

Fitz's calm tone of optimism was certainly surprising. The Chief Constable and myself exchanged rather rueful glances. We appeared to have pledged ourselves to a course of action that might have the most serious and far-reaching consequences.

CHAPTER VIII

PREPARATIONS FOR THE CAMPAIGN

One thing was perfectly clear; we were pretty well in a cleft stick. So heartily had we espoused the cause of a much injured man, that to withhold practical assistance, now it was needed so sorely, was hardly possible. Yet there could be no doubt that discomfiture and perplexity were beginning to play the deuce with the Chief Constable's official placidity. I also, "a married man, a father of a family and a county member," began to have qualms.

"Three other stout fellows," said Fitz, "who are not afraid of a tight place and who can be trusted with a revolver are almost a necessity. The trouble is to find them."

On many occasions since, I have had cause to review my conduct in this crisis. Whether it was that of a sane, judicial-minded, law-abiding unit of society I have never been able to determine. Doubtless I erred egregiously. All the same I shall always protest that Nevil Fitzwaren was a much injured man. Moreover, now that the call to arms had come to him, nature had thought fit to invest him with that occult power that makes a man a leader of others. I could not have believed such a transfiguration to be possible. He

seemed suddenly to emerge as the possessor of a steadfastness of purpose and a strength of will which commanded sympathy in almost the same measure that his pathetic helplessness had in the first place aroused it.

"Can you suggest three stout fellows, Arbuthnot? Gentlemen, if possible, and chaps to be trusted. Of course they will have to know the why and wherefore of it all."

Under the spell that Fitz was wielding over me I became the victim of an inspiration. In a flash there came into my mind the three gamesters necessary to complete the *partie*. They were Jodey, his friend in Jermyn Street, "who had had lessons from Burns," and that much enduring but thoroughly sound-hearted fellow, the Master of the Crackanthorpe. For an instant I reflected with the Napoleonic gaze of Fitz upon me. And then through sheer human weakness I committed the most signal indiscretion of which a tolerably blameless existence had ever been guilty. I permitted the names of these three champions to cross my lips.

Coverdale turned his sombre eyes upon me. They were devoid of anger, but extremely full of sorrow.

"You old fool!" he said under his breath. "You look like landing us fairly."

"Well," whispered the egregious I, "we can't leave the poor chap in the lurch at this stage of the proceedings, can we?"

"I suppose not; but this business looks like costing me my billet. Let us pray God he don't intend to shoot the Ambassador."

"Not he," said I, assuming a cheerfulness I did not

feel, in the hope of minimising my lapse from the strait way of prudence. "He is a very sensible fellow and a devilish plucky one."

The immediate result of my indiscretion was that I was urged to summon my relation by marriage, in order that his valuable services might be enlisted. With that end in view, Parkins was sent in search of him. He returned all too soon with the information that he was over at the Hall playing billiards with Lord Brasset.

"Two birds with one stone!" said Fitz exultantly. "The best thing we can do is to go over and see them."

The Hall is not more than a hundred yards or so from our modest demesne; and at Fitz's behest we set forth in quest of recruits.

"Nice state o' things!" growled Coverdale *en route*.

In due course we were ushered into Brasset's billiard room. The owner thereof and my relation by marriage were engaged in a friendly but one-sided game of shilling snooker. The latter, in accordance with his invariable practice of "putting his best leg first" to atone for the lifelong handicap of having been born a younger son, was potting three times the number of balls of his charmingly amiable and courteous opponent.

"Hullo, you fellows," said Brasset. "Take a cue and join us."

The presence in that place of the husband of Mrs. Fitz was wholly unlooked-for, but neither of the players betrayed their surprise. Any surprise they had to display was duly forthcoming later.

Most people who have mixed at all with their fellows are more or less finished dissemblers. But Brasset and

Jodey were by no means proof against the extraordinary tale that Fitz had come to unfold.

"Heiress to oldest reigning family in Europe!" exclaimed Brasset, whose perturbation and bewilderment were comic in the extreme. "In that case she had an absolute *right* to hit me over the head with her crop, even if she did go rather far in overriding Challenger."

As for Joseph Jocelyn De Vere Vane-Anstruther, his countenance was a study.

"Well, I always said she was *it*," he murmured rapturously.

"Stand by you—ra-*ther!*" said Brasset. "Only too proud. I've got a beautiful Colt revolver in my bureau. Shot a lion with it in Africa."

"Then you ought to be able to manage an ambassador in Portland Place," said I.

"Ra-*ther!*"

"It's a go then?" said Fitz. "I can count on you fellows to give me a hand. We may have to put it across that swine von Arlenberg, although of course he is merely obeying the orders of Ferdinand."

"Yes, of course."

The two recruits to the cause of the Crown Princess beamed joyfully. They took the oath of fealty, which merely assumed the form of promising to dine at Ward's before the event, and promising to sup at the Savoy after it.

The sixth person essential to the success of Fitz's scheme was the unknown sportsman of Jermyn Street, who had had lessons from Burns. Jodey was emphatic in his declaration that his friend, whom he proclaimed

as "the amateur middle weight champion of the United Kingdom," would be only too eager to seize one of the great opportunities of his life. A telegram was immediately concocted for this paladin, who was urged to turn up at Ward's on the morrow at the appointed hour. "Bring a revolver with you. There will be a bit of fun going after dinner," was the clause that the author of the telegram was keenly desirous to insert.

Opinion was divided as to the wisdom of inserting the clause in question. To the shrewd and cautious official mind, as represented by Coverdale, it would be sufficient to urge a sensible and law-abiding citizen to give the proposed dinner party a wide berth. Personally, I was of Coverdale's opinion; Fitz and Brasset "saw nothing out of the way in it," while its author was convinced that so little would the clause in question be likely to deter his friend O'Mulligan, that it would invest a commonplace invitation to dine at Ward's and sup at the Savoy with a sufficient spice of romance to preclude "the best sportsman that ever came out of Ireland" from having a previous engagement.

Youth will be served. Jodey's lucid argument carried weight enough for the telegram to be sent to Jermyn Street in all its pristine integrity. Coverdale looked rueful all the same, and I felt his gaze of grave reproach upon me. The leader of the enterprise, however, was far from sharing the misgivings of the Chief Constable. On the contrary, he felt that the cause of the Princess Sonia had gained three valuable recruits.

Certainly, the demeanour of Brasset and of my relation by marriage left nothing to be desired from the

point of view of whole-heartedness. They were only too eager to embrace the opportunity of redressing a notorious wrong. Coverdale and I could by no means rise to their enthusiasm. We were both over forty, and at that time of life the average man cannot evoke that quality, unless it is in the pursuit of a peerage, but in our innermost hearts we were fain to feel that it did them honour.

To Brasset's suggestion that we should dine with him that evening, in order that we might evolve, as far as in us lay, a plan of campaign, we yielded a ready response. Incidentally, it may be well to state that Brasset is unmarried, and that his mother was spending the winter at San Remo.

It was in sore travail of the spirit that I walked back to Dympsfield House, and proceeded to hunt for the weapon which was kept in my dressing-room as a precaution against burglars. Ruefully it was taken from its sanctuary and examined. Then I went in search of the ruler of the household. Having found her pottering about the greenhouse, I broke the news that I was dining out that evening, and that on the morrow duty called me to the metropolis, because I feared that my aged grandmother's chronic bronchitis had taken a turn for the worse.

Both these announcements were accepted with more serenity than the inward monitor had led me to anticipate.

"By all means dine with Reggie Brasset, although I think it is very wrong of him not to ask me. And by all means go to London to-morrow to see poor dear

Gran, and"—here it was that the first small fly was disclosed in the ointment—"take me. Now that the weather has gone all to pieces, it is a good time to see the new plays; and I must have at least two new frocks and one of those chinchilla coats that everybody is wearing."

There are occasions when the most reciprocal nature may regard marriage as an overrated institution.

"But, my dear child," I gasped, "did you not promise upon your sacred word of honour that if you had that mare at the beginning of November, you would not want to exceed your dress allowance before the summer?"

"Did I?" said a voice of bland inquiry.

"Did you, *mon enfant!*"

"But then you see the poor thing has been lame for quite a fortnight."

It was man's work to convince Mrs. Arbuthnot, delicately, tenderly, but quite firmly, that not for a moment could her demands be entertained. How in the end it was contrived I shall not attempt to explain. Who among us is competent to render these hearthrug diplomacies in a just notation? But by some occult means I was able to effect a compromise upon terms which only a sanguine temperament could have hoped for. I was to be permitted to dine with Brasset and play a quiet rubber of bridge, and on the morrow I was to go to town to spend the week end with my grandmother; in consideration of which benefits, the second party to the contract was to spend the week end with her admirable parents at Doughty Bridge, Yorks., and

become the recipient of a sable stole and an oxydised silver muff chain.

I could not help feeling that such a compact was extremely honourable to the political side of my nature. I had been prepared for pearl earrings or a new opera cloak at the least. There can be little doubt that tolerably regular attendance at the House of Commons during the course of three sessions does not a little to equip a man for the more complex phases of civilised life.

Brasset's impromptu dinner party that evening was a decided success. For this happy result he was not a little indebted to the foresight of his amiable and ever-lamented father. The wine was excellent. Even the Chief Constable, who looked as sombre as a cardinal and as rueful as Don Quixote, swallowed the brown sherry with approbation, toyed with the lighter vintages, sipped the port wine with sage approval, admired the old brandy and told one of the best stories I have ever heard in my life.

At the conclusion of this masterpiece of refined ribaldry, Brasset gave a peremptory little rap on the table and rose to his feet.

"Gentlemen," said he, "I ask you to drink the health of the Crown Princess of Illyria. May God defend the right! With the toast, I beg to be allowed to couple the name of our friend and neighbour, Mr. Nevil Fitzwaren."

The toast was honoured in due form.

"Thank you, gentlemen," Fitz's reply was made with touching simplicity. "God *will* ever defend the right. He always does. But I thank you all from the bottom

of my heart for standing by me to see that I get fair play. It's good to be born an Englishman."

"Hear, hear; quite so," said the Chief Constable.

Out of the corner of one rueful eye, however, the head of our constabulary favoured me with a glance that was at once whimsical and lugubrious. The thought was ever-present in that official breast that the slightest hitch in a decidedly precarious adventure would be fraught for all concerned in it with consequences which he did not care to contemplate.

CHAPTER IX

ON THE EVE

A CALM inquiry into the case rendered it inconceivable that two pillars of the Constitution should commit themselves irrevocably to a scheme of action whose true sphere was the boards of a playhouse or the pages of a lurid romance. By what lapse of the reason had they permitted themselves to drift into a position so ludicrous yet so eminently dangerous? Possibly it was right for irresponsible youth; possibly it was right for men of temperament like the heroic Fitz; but for Lieutenant Colonel John Chalmers Coverdale, C.M.G., late of His Majesty's Carabineers, and Odo Arbuthnot, Member of Parliament for the Uppingdon Division of Middleshire, it was confessedly an egregious folly.

We were both past the age when such a scheme would have appealed to our high spirits as a superior sort of "rag." Once embarked upon it, who should say whither it might lead? It was impossible to foretell the course of such an adventure. Two such devotees of law and order did well to entertain misgivings, even with the wine cup in their hands.

As far as the other side of the picture was concerned, Fitz was fully entitled to regard himself as a much injured man. It is true that in the first instance he

had taken the liberty of contracting a morganatic marriage with a princess in the direct line of succession of a reigning house. But in a country like ours, where the freedom of the subject and the right of the individual to shape his own destiny form the keystone of the arch upon which the fabric of society is raised, it was impossible not to sympathise keenly with Fitz. All freeborn Englishmen could not fail to resent the intervention of an irresponsible third party, who was recklessly determined to violate a tie that had the sanction of God.

Over our cigars, when the servants had left the room, the orders for the morrow were discussed.

"I hope, Fitzwaren," said the Chief Constable, "that you fully realise the extreme gravity of your undertaking. A single error of judgment, a single slip in your mode of procedure and we are certain to find ourselves very badly landed indeed. Personally, I hope very much that you will leave lethal weapons out of the case. If we carry them we run up against the law; and not only will they prejudice our cause but there is no saying to what they may lead."

"I should like," said I, "to identify myself with these remarks of Coverdale's. I concur entirely."

Fitz removed the cigar from his lips and leaned back in his chair. He seemed to be pondering deeply.

"I respect the opinion of both of you," he said, speaking with a good deal of deliberation after a pause that was somewhat lengthy. "You are quite right in one sense, but in the most important sense of all, I am sure you are wrong. I should like everybody who is

going into this business to understand clearly that it is most likely to prove extremely serious. We must take every reasonable precaution, because the moment we enter von Arlenberg's house we carry our lives in our hands. I know these Illyrians; as soon as they understand our game they will use no ceremony. Law or no law, they will shoot us like dogs if they think it is necessary. And I can assure you they will think it is necessary, unless we get them with their hands up."

"I don't like lethal weapons," said the Chief Constable.

"I don't like them either," said Fitz, "but if we are to come through with this business, we shall be compelled to carry them." Suddenly his voice sank. "The truth is, this game is so dangerous, that I don't urge anybody to take part in it. Let any man who thinks the cause is good enough follow me with a loaded revolver in his right hand trouser pocket; and let any man who doesn't keep out of it, and I shall be the last to blame him."

In the language there may not have been persuasiveness, but there was a good deal in the tone. Fitz's manner was that of a leader of others; of one who foresaw the risks he incurred; who embraced them deliberately; who having once formed his plan stuck to it whatever it might entail.

Coverdale had seen service in Zululand, the Transvaal and in Egypt; Brasset and I had borne a humble share in the recent transactions in South Africa; yet in an unconscious way we were all susceptible to the play of a powerful will and a magnetic personality.

Cynics may say it was the wine that turned the scale—the juice of the grape is the fount of many a hardy resolution—but I prefer to think it was the quality of Fitz himself. Retreat at the eleventh hour might have been construed as dishonourable, but men like Coverdale had no need to be fantastically nice upon the point of honour. It was, I think, that Fitz carried conviction. His was the inestimable gift of rising with his theme. Heaven knew! the enterprise was foolhardy, but the man himself was a good one to follow.

All the same, when we adjourned our meeting with the compact that we should assemble at Middleham railway station on the morrow in time to catch the 3.30 to London, I went home in a state of depression. Were I to have been hanged at cock crow, I could not have found my bed more unsympathetic. Most of the night I lay awake in a state of the most unworthy apprehension. The very intangibility of the business of the morrow seemed to make it a nightmare. Had it been a duel, or a definite pitting of one known force against another, it would have seemed less uncomfortable, less sinister. As it was, we did not know precisely to what we stood committed. The thing might prove merely farcical. On the contrary, it might involve battle, murder and sudden death.

A dozen times in the dismal darkness the question was put, by what chain of events had a mildly egoistical hedonist, the husband of a charming lady, the father of a merry blue-eyed daughter, with a reasonable competence and an ambition to excel at golf, come to imperil

all these delectable things? Merely at the beck of a wild-living profligate who felt he had been wronged.

Stated as bluntly as this in the high court of reason the whole thing seemed absurd. There was so much to lose and so little to gain. The scheme was preposterous. Nevil Fitzwaren might certainly be the victim of an injustice, but what of Miss Lucinda and her mama? True, Coverdale was also a party to the scheme; but he was by nature adventurous, a seeker after something fresh. To be sure he imperilled his billet, but he was understood to have private means.

"Odo Arbuthnot," said the thin voice of reason at three o'clock in the morning, "you must withdraw from this incredibly foolish and reprehensible proceeding."

Howbeit the voice of reason never sways us entirely. Accordingly I made a particularly feeble breakfast, wrote a letter to my grandmother in Bolton Street, sped the Madam, looking supremely gay and engaging, on the way to her fond parents at Doughty Bridge, Yorks., read the immortal story of "The Three Bears" to Miss Lucinda for the thousand and first time, carefully overhauled the six-chambered weapon which a professional criminal had yet to put to the test, and in a miserable frame of mind sat down to luncheon in the company of my relation by marriage.

It may be that the holy state of wedlock makes cowards of us all. Joseph Jocelyn De Vere Vane-Anstruther was certainly not embarrassed by such qualms as these. He was even more serenely magnificent than usual in a suit of grey tweeds aggressively checked and a waistcoat that was conducting a violent

quarrel with a Zingari necktie; while his air of hopeful enjoyment of life as it was and as it was going to be, provoked some rather pregnant reflections upon the crime of homicide.

"O'Mulligan's wired. Mad keen. A regular nut."

The well of English undefiled grows more copious with the process of ages. By what mysterious alchemy the quality of mad keenness transforms its possessor into a "regular nut" I was too low-spirited to elucidate.

"Fitz is a game bird, ain't he?" Flamboyant youth heartily poured half a bottle of Worcestershire sauce over its cutlet. "Didn't think he had it in him. Merely shows how you can be deceived."

I groaned in spirit, but plucked up the courage to take a dismal nibble at a piece of toast.

"That chap Coverdale is a bit of a funkstick. Made himself rather an ass about those firearms."

I assented feebly.

"Bet you a pony they want our photographs for the *Morning Mirror*."

I rose from the table and took a turn in the kitchen garden. When your heart is fairly in your boots, the society of your peers has its drawbacks.

At half past two, punctual to the minute, the toot of the car was heard at the hall door. Miss Lucinda received a parting salute and an illicit box of chocolates which consoled her immensely for the temporary loss—permanent perhaps in the case of one—of both her parents.

I confess to being one of those weak mortals who on a journey is invariably accompanied by the conscious-

ness of having left something undone or having omitted to pack some unremembered but quite indispensable necessary. Three-fourths of the way to the station I was haunted with this feeling in a more acute form than usual, and then quite suddenly, with a spasm of perverse joy, it occurred to me that I had left the burglar's foe in its secret receptacle.

"Thank God for that!" was the pious hyperbole which ascended to heaven.

At the station we were not the first to arrive on the scene, although there was a full quarter of an hour in hand. Fitz in a fur overcoat of some pretensions bore a look of collected importance which was quite in keeping with the *rôle* he had to fill.

"Tickets are taken," said he, "and carriage reserved for five."

In front of the bookstall a yellow newsbill displayed the contents of a London evening paper, issued at noon. "The Attempt on the Life of the King of Illyria. Latest details."

"Clumsy fools," said the son-in-law of Ferdinand the Twelfth gloomily. "They seem to have bungled the business badly, but they bungle everything in Illyria."

"His Excellency, the Ambassador, would appear to be an exception to the general rule."

Fitz bestowed upon me a murderous glower.

Brasset arrived full five minutes in advance of the London express. Pink and cherubic, his recent perplexity had yielded to an omnipresent look of peace. His well-groomed air suggested that he took a simple pleasure in being alive.

The question, however, for the four conspirators assembled on the Middleham platform was, what had happened to the Chief Constable? Was it conceivable that the noble Brutus had left us in the lurch? Remembering my own travail of the spirit, which still endured, it seemed most natural and becoming to my partial judgment, that one so wise had repented of his folly at the eleventh hour.

Howbeit, my lips were sealed upon these illicit thoughts. Fitz himself suspected no treachery. He ushered us into the reserved compartment with immense dignity, and retained the left hand corner seat, with the back to the engine, for the missing warrior.

"Coverdale is cutting it fine," I ventured to remark.

"There is a minute yet," said Fitz with an insouciance which, to use a much-abused expression, was Napoleonic.

A porter who suffered from rickets put in his head.

"All London, gentlemen?"

"Yes," said Fitz, introducing a shilling to a grimy but willing palm. "And just see that the station-master keeps the train a few minutes for Colonel Coverdale."

"Agen the regulations you know, sir," said the porter with polite misgiving.

"Against what regulations?" said the undefeated Fitz.

"The Company's."

"Against the Company's regulations! Who the devil are the Company that *they* should have regulations?"

This was a poser for the porter, who made a rather ineffectual apology for such a piece of assumption on

the part of the Company. But the station-master's bell was ringing, and I, peering wildly through the window, in the vain hope that my mentor, my hope, my stand-by might after all appear, could see never a sign of Lieutenant Colonel John Chalmers Coverdale, C.M.G., late of His Majesty's Carabineers.

CHAPTER X

ALARUMS AND EXCURSIONS

But what is that? A commotion away up the platform, under the clock. Yes, it is he, the faithful and the valiant! At least it is not he, but one Baguley, a superannuated police sergeant, bereft of an eye in the service of the public peace. He staggers along under the oppressive burden of a kit bag of portentous dimensions, and twenty paces behind, sauntering along the platform with the most leisurely nonchalance in the world, blandly indifferent to the fact that the London express is due out, is the impressive and slightly pompous bulk of the fifth conspirator, the great Chief Constable.

There is a tremendous touching of hats along the platform. Even that true Olympian, the guard of the London express, contrives to dissemble his legitimate impatience, while Coverdale and his kit bag come aboard the reserved compartment.

"Cutting it rather fine, weren't you?" said I with a tremor of relief in my voice.

"Time enough," said the Chief Constable, subsiding with a growl and a glower into the left hand corner.

A shrill blast from the guard, a whistle and a snort from the engine, and we were irrevocably committed to the untender hands of destiny.

We were an ill-assorted party enough. Fitz the embodiment of masterful determination, with his black eyes glowing with their inward fire; Brasset and Jodey as cheerful and almost as *blasé* as two undergraduates on their way to attend a point-to-point race meeting; and Coverdale and the humble individual responsible for this narrative, silent, saturnine and profoundly uncomfortable.

It is true that I was favoured with one fragment of the Chief Constable's discourse. It was communicated with pregnant brevity ten miles from Bedford.

"You old fool!" was its context.

"It was Fitz who kept the train for you," I countered weakly.

Whoever was to blame we were fairly in for it now; and to repine was vain.

"I am glad about your friend O'What's-his-name," said Fitz to Jodey. "A man of his hands, hey? By the way, I believe you did mention a revolver."

My relation by marriage grinned an almost disgustingly effusive affirmative.

"I suppose you fellows have all remembered to bring one!"

Somehow my looks bewrayed me.

"You've brought one, Arbuthnot?"

I began to perspire.

"The fact is," said I, "I had a capital .38 Webley, but it appears to be mislaid."

"That can easily be remedied. I have brought three in case of emergency."

"How lucky," said I with insincerity.

We were converging upon the metropolis all too soon.

"I have engaged six bedrooms at Long's Hotel," said Fitz.

"Only five will be necessary," said I, "as O'Mulligan lives in Jermyn Street."

"You have forgotten Sonia."

It is true that for the moment I had forgotten the cause of all our woes. Fitz had not however; indeed, he had forgotten nothing. Not only did he appear to have everything arranged, but he seemed to have taken cognisance of the smallest detail.

"I have ordered quite a decent little dinner at Ward's," said he. "You can always depend upon good plain, solid, old-fashioned English cooking. They give you the best mulligatawney in London. I must say myself, that if I have to do a man's work, I like to have a man's meal. And I think we can depend on some very decent madeira."

"It is very satisfactory to know that," said Coverdale with his deepest growl.

"There is nothing like madeira in my opinion," said Fitz, "if you are going to be busy and you want to keep cool."

"That is something to know," said the Chief Constable without enthusiasm.

"I should think it was," said Fitz. "Do you know who gave me the tip?"

The Chief Constable gave a growl in the negative.

"Ferdinand himself. And what that old swine don't know of most things, is not much in the way of knowledge. He once told me he practically lived on madeira

throughout the Austrian campaign and the night before Rodova he drank six bottles. He says nothing keeps you so cool and sharp as madeira."

"Umph," the Chief Constable grunted.

Brasset and Jodey, however, two extremely zealous subalterns in the Middleshire Yeomanry, were much impressed.

In three taxis we converged upon Long's Hotel; Brasset and Jodey in the first; the Chief Constable and his kit bag in the second; Fitz and myself in the third. A very respectable blizzard was raging; the streets of the metropolis were in a truly horrid condition, wholly unfit for man or beast; and the atmosphere had the peculiar raw chill of a thoroughly disagreeable winter's night in London. But at every yard we slopped precariously through the half melted slush of the streets, Fitz seemed to wax more Napoleonic. He was not in any sense aggressive; there was not a trace of undue mental or moral elevation, yet he was the possessor of a subtle quality that seemed to render him equal to any occasion.

"There is just one thing may undo us," he confessed to me.

"Fate?"

"No; to my mind fate is never your master, if you really mean to be master of it. But there may be a spy. Von Arlenberg is as cunning as a fox. And if he thinks I may have something to say in the matter, he will take care that nothing is done without his knowledge. Probably we are being followed."

To test his grounds for this suspicion, Fitz suddenly

ordered the driver to stop. He thrust his head out of the window, and then an instant later told our Jehu to drive on.

"Just as I thought," he said. "There is another taxi behind."

My companion became silent.

"Something will have to be done," he said. "It won't do for von Arlenberg to know too much."

During the remainder of the journey Fitz found not a word to say.

When we came to the quiet family hotel in Bond Street our leader seemed still preoccupied. Certainly he had grounds for his foreboding. A fourth taxi drew up behind the three vehicles we had chartered; and I observed that a man got out of it, and discharging his taxi, entered the hotel. As he passed me I was careful to note his appearance. He was a short, sallow, foreign looking individual, with the collar of his overcoat turned up; a commonplace creature enough, who on most occasions would pass without a remark.

While we enquired for our rooms, he sat in the lounge unobtrusively. Save for Fitz's own conviction upon the point, it would never have occurred to me that we were undergoing a process of espionage.

No sooner had Fitz secured his room, than he said in a tone considerably louder than he used as a rule, that he had some business to see after, and that he would be back in an hour.

The man seated in the lounge could not fail to hear this announcement. And sure enough, hardly had Fitz

passed out of the hotel, when the fellow rose and also took his leave.

"What is Fitzwaren's game now?" inquired Coverdale.

I refrained from advancing any theory as to the nature of Fitz's game. For that matter, I had no theory to advance. It was clear enough that the leader of our enterprise was fully justified in his suspicion, but what his sagacity would profit him, I was wholly at a loss to divine. I was convinced that the business that had called him so suddenly into the sleet-laden darkness of the streets had to do with the man who had passed out of the hotel upon his heels; yet precisely what that business was, it was futile to conjecture.

Prior to our departure for Ward's, the time hung upon our hands somewhat heavily. Brasset and Jodey utilised some of it in bestowing even more pains than usual upon their appearance. In these days it is not necessary to don powder, ruffles and a brocaded waistcoat for the purpose of dining at Ward's, but there is an unwritten law which expects you to wear a white vest at least with your evening clothes. Even Coverdale and I thought well to comply with this sumptuary law. We were both past the age when one's tailor is omnipotent; but when in Rome, those who would be thought men of the world are careful to do like the Romans.

Four carefully groomed specimens of British manhood greeted Fitz in the hotel foyer upon his return. It was then five minutes to seven, and our mentor entered in a perfectly cool and collected manner. He apolo-

gised, perhaps a thought deliberately, for the necessity which had deprived us of his society. Twenty minutes later he was looking as spick and span as the rest of us.

While the hotel porter was whistling up the necessary means for our conveyance to Saint James's Street, I found Fitz at my elbow.

"By the way," said he in a casual undertone, "did you mention to the others about the fellow who followed us in the taxi?"

My answer was in the negative.

"I'm glad of that. I think it will be wise if you don't. It might worry them, you know. And there is no need to worry about him now."

"Have you thrown him off the scent?"

"Yes," said Fitz quietly. "We shall have no more trouble from that sportsman."

I forebore to allow my curiosity any further rein upon this subject. Beneath Fitz's cool and cordial tone was a suggestion that he would thank me to dismiss it. Howbeit, I had no hint as to what had happened outside in the street, and I was burning to know.

It was a minute past the half hour when we arrived at Ward's, but the punctual O'Mulligan was there already. He rejoiced in the name of Alexander; his freckles were many and he had a shock of red hair. His nose was of the snub variety; his ears stuck out at right angles; his eyes were light green; and his jaw was square and massive and the most magnificently aggressive the mind of man can conceive. Regarded from the purely æsthetic standpoint, Alexander O'Mul-

ligan might be a subject for discussion, yet he was as full of "points" as a prize bulldog. He was not so tall as Coverdale, but every ounce of him was solid muscle; his chest was deep and spreading, his hands were corded and he had the grip of a garrotter.

Alexander O'Mulligan shook hands all around with the greatest comprehensiveness. As he did so he grinned from ear to ear in the sheer joy of acquaintanceship. Fitz was his first victim and I was his last, but each of us would as lief shake hands with a gibbon as with our friend O'Mulligan. The fellow was so abominably hearty. He shook hands as though it was the thing of all others he loved doing best in the world.

The dinner was admirable. Whether it was force of example, or the magnetic presence of Alexander O'Mulligan, I am not prepared to say, but certainly we did ourselves very well. Upon first entering the hallowed precincts of Ward's, I had been in no mood to appreciate "really good old-fashioned English cooking." One would have thought that only the most *recherché* of dinners would have tempted us in our present state of mind. But somehow our new friend O'Mulligan dispensed an atmosphere of Gargantuan good humour.

Hardly had we come to close quarters with the far-famed mulligatawney, which was quite appropriate to the conditions prevailing without, when our latest recruit insisted that one and all must dine with him on the morrow, and then adjourn to the National Sporting Club, for the purpose of witnessing "Burns's go with the gunner."

If I live to the age of a hundred and twenty, I shall not forget our little dinner at Ward's. Six commonplace specimens of *les hommes moyens sensuels* with lethal weapons in their pockets and anything from pitch and toss to manslaughter in their hearts! Really, it was the incongruous carried to the verge of the *bizarre*.

Fitz at the head of the table was gracious to a degree. The fellow was revealing a whole gamut of unsuspected qualities. His composure, his half gay, half sinister insouciance, his alertness, his knowledge, his faculty for action, which seemed to grow in proportion with the demands that were made upon it, such an array of qualities was curiously inconsistent with the heedless waster the world had always judged him to be.

Now that he had come to grips with fate the real Nevil Fitzwaren was emerging with considerable potency. As far as "the married man, the father of the family and the county member" was concerned the fellow's dæmonic power was the cause of his dining quite reasonably well. As for Coverdale, after swallowing his plate of mulligatawney, his glance ceased to reproach me. His habitual philosophy and the old-fashioned English cooking began to walk hand in hand. The evening's business was quite likely to cost him his billet, but at least it was sure to be excellent fun. Besides, when he stood committed to a thing, it was his habit to see it through.

Dinner was conducted in the spirit of leisurely harmony which is due to the traditions accruing to the shade of John Ward who left this vale of tears in 1720. Fitz assured us that there was no hurry. If we got a

move on about nine we should have plenty of time to do our business with his Excellency.

"You haven't quite explained the orders for the day, my dear fellow," said Coverdale, taking a reverential sip of the famous old brandy.

CHAPTER XI

THE ORDERS FOR THE DAY

"The orders for the day don't need much explanation," said Fitz. "Merely see that there are six cartridges in your revolver; keep it in your trouser pocket with your hand on it, and then follow the man from Cook's."

"Like all schemes of the first magnitude," said I, "it appears to be simplicity itself."

"It is this confounded revolver business," said Coverdale, "that I should like to see dispensed with. It might so easily land us in serious trouble."

"It is far more likely to land us out of serious trouble," said Fitz. "But this I can promise: they will not be produced except in the last resort."

It was clear that the question of the revolvers had made Coverdale as uneasy as it had made me; but the only thing to be done now was to pin implicit faith upon the sameness of Fitz's judgment. Certainly he had aroused respect. His method of communicating to Alexander O'Mulligan the nature of the cause and the need for absolute obedience to the word of command appeared to kindle awe and admiration in equal parts in the breast of the middle weight champion of the United Kingdom.

"Do exactly as you are told, O'Mulligan, and do nothing without orders, unless they begin to shoot, and then you begin to shoot too. By the way, Arbuthnot, did I understand you to say you had forgotten to bring a revolver?"

I admitted the impeachment.

"I have several spare ones in my overcoat"—the tone of reproof was delicate. "Is there anyone else who has forgotten to provide himself with one?"

"There is also a spare one at my rooms round the corner," said Alexander O'Mulligan, with an air of modest pride.

Fitz honoured the new recruit with a nod of curt approval. In any assembly of lawbreakers the Bayard from Jermyn Street would be sure of a hearty welcome. His face had expanded to the most moonlike proportions, which the freckles and the prominent ears set off fantastically; and in the green eyes was a look of genuine ecstasy, beside which the emotion in those of Brasset and Jodey was mere hopeful expectation.

Fitz took out his watch and studied it with the air of the Man of Destiny.

"Fourteen minutes to nine," said he. "At nine o'clock I shall drive alone to No. 300 Portland Place, in a taxi. At four minutes past nine, Coverdale and Arbuthnot will follow. They will ask for the Ambassador, Coverdale giving the name of General Drago, and Arbuthnot the name of Count Alexis Zbynska. You will be shown into a waiting-room while your names are taken in to his Excellency. If he is in, he will receive you; if he is not, Grindberg, or one of the other

secretaries, or one of the attachés, will have a word with you. Keep your mufflers up to your ears and have the collars of your overcoats turned up. If von Arlenberg is not in, say you will wait for him. You can use Illyrian, or French, or broken English. Of course your object, in any case, will be to gain time and keep in the house until you receive further instructions. Am I clear?"

"Reasonably clear," said Coverdale. "If we gain access to the house we are not to leave it until we hear from you?"

"That is so."

"And what about Alec and Brasset and me?" The earnestness of my relation by marriage was wistful.

"O'Mulligan will leave four minutes after Coverdale and Arbuthnot. He will merely give his name as Captain Forbes, who desires to fix an appointment with von Arlenberg upon a private matter of importance. He won't be able to fix it; but they will send a chap to talk to you, O'Mulligan. You must be very long-winded and you must use your best English, and you must waste as much time as you can. Understand?"

O'Mulligan beamed like a seraph.

"And Brasset and me?" said the pleading voice.

"Brasset will leave four minutes after O'Mulligan. He will be Mr. Bonser, a messenger from the Foreign Office, with a letter for von Arlenberg. Here you are, Brasset, here is the letter for von Arlenberg."

With a matter-of-factness which was really inimitable, Fitz tossed across the tablecloth the missive in question, copiously daubed with red sealing wax.

"Brasset," said Fitz, "you will be careful not to give this most important letter into the keeping of anybody save and except his Excellency, Baron von Arlenberg, Ambassador and Plenipotentiary Extraordinary to his Majesty the King of Illyria, at the Court of Saint James."

"I hope the superscription is correct," said I, misguidedly.

Fitz looked me down with the eye of a Frederick. The sympathy of the table was with him entirely.

"Somebody will want to take it to the Ambassador," said Fitz. "But, Brasset, your instructions are that you deliver this document to his Excellency in person."

With an air of reverence, Brasset inserted the letter with its portentous red seal in his cigar-case. The most exacting of ministers could not have desired a more trustworthy or a more eminently discreet custodian for an epoch-making document than the Master of the Crackanthorpe.

"How shall I know old von Thingamy when I see him?" inquired the messenger from the Foreign Office.

"You won't see him," said Fitz. "But you must make it appear that you want to see him particularly."

"But if I should happen to see him?"

The Master of the Crackanthorpe was awed into silence by a Napoleonic gesture.

"Where do I come in?" said the pleading voice from the wilderness.

"You come in, Vane-Anstruther," said Fitz to my relation by marriage, "four minutes after Brasset. You are Lieutenant von Wildengarth-Mergle from

Blaenau, with a letter of introduction to the Illyrian Ambassador. Here is your card, and you can give it to anybody you like."

The recipient was immensely gratified by the card of Lieutenant von Wildengarth-Mergle of the Ninth Regiment of Hussars when it was bestowed upon him. His manner of disposing of it was precisely similar to that adopted by Brasset in the case of the letter from the Foreign Office. His bearing also was modelled obviously upon that of that ornament of high diplomacy.

"I assume," said I, "that we are all to bluff our way into the Illyrian Embassy; and once we are there we are to take care to stay until we are advised further?"

"That is so."

"But let us assume for a moment that we get no advice?"

"If I do not come to you by ten minutes to ten, or you are not sent for by then, you are all to leave any anteroom you may be in, and you are to walk straight up the central staircase, taking notice of nobody. If they try to stop you, merely say you wish to see the Ambassador."

"And if they use force?"

"Make use of it yourself, with as much noise as you can. And if you still fail to hear from me, then will be the time to think about retirement. Does everybody understand?"

Everybody did apparently.

"It is seven minutes to nine. Time we began to collect our taxis."

Fitz rose from the table, and in a body we went in search of our coats and hats. For my fellow conspirators I cannot speak, but my heart was beating in the absurdest manner, and my veins were tingling. There was that sense of exaltation in them which is generally reserved for a quick twenty minutes over the grass.

"Give me that revolver," said I.

As Fitz smuggled the weapon into my hand, I could feel my pulses leaping immorally. This sensation may have been due to my having dined at Ward's; although doubtless it is more scientific to ascribe it to some primeval instinct which has resisted civilisation's ravages upon human nature.

As I stealthily inserted the weapon into the pocket of my trousers, I stole a covert glance at the solemn visage of the Chief Constable. The great man was smiling benignly at his thoughts, and smoking a big cigar with an air of Homeric enjoyment.

As Fitz, tall-hatted and fur-coated, picked his way delicately down the slush-covered steps to where his taxi awaited him, he turned to offer a word of final instruction to his followers.

"Coverdale and Arbuthnot 9.4; O'Mulligan 9.8; Brasset 9.12; Vane-Anstruther 9.16. If you hear nothing in the meantime, at 9.50 you go upstairs."

"Righto," we chorussed, as Fitz boarded his chariot with a self-possession that was even touched with languor.

We watched him turn into Piccadilly, and then proceeded solemnly to invest ourselves in coats and mufflers.

Four minutes is not a long space of time, yet it is quite possible for it to seem an age. Before the hall clock pointed to 9.4, one might have had a double molar drawn, or one's head cut off by the guillotine.

"300 Portland Place," said the Chief Constable in tones which somehow seemed astonishingly loud, while I squeezed as far as possible into the far corner of the vehicle for the better accommodation of my stalwart companion.

"Dirty night," said the Chief Constable. "Not fit for a dog to be out. Have the glass down?"

It may have been an overwrought fancy, but I thought I perceived a slight, but unmistakable tremor in the voice of the head of the Middleshire Constabulary.

"Not for me, thanks," said I. "These things are so stuffy."

The head of the Middleshire Constabulary agreed with me. The impression may have been due to a disordered fancy, but I thought I detected a note of embarrassment in the Chief Constable's laugh.

From Saint James's Street to Portland Place is not far, and this evening we seemed to accomplish the journey in a very short time. Having dismissed our taxi at the door of the Ambassador's imposing residence, we each looked to the other to ring his Excellency's doorbell.

"General," said I, "you are my senior, and I feel that your Illyrian, or your French, or your broken English, or any other language in which you may be moved to indulge, will carry more weight than mine."

"Oh, do you! By the way, I have forgotten my name."

"General Drago."

"And yours?"

"Count Alexis Zbynska."

"Well, here goes."

The gallant warrior gave a mighty tug at the bell. This met with no attention; but at the second assault on the ambassadorial door-bell, the massive portal was swung back, slowly and solemnly, by a gorgeous menial. In the immediate background there were others.

"I am General Drago, and I wish to see the Ambassador." The Chief Constable's precision of phrase was really majestic.

The stalwart Illyrian, who seemed to be quite seven feet high from the crown of his wig to the soles of his silk stockings, bowed and led the way within.

When we had crossed his Excellency's threshold, and just as a gorgeous interior had unfolded itself to our respectful gaze, a very urbane-looking personage in evening clothes and a pair of white kid gloves took charge of us. He led us through a spacious hall containing pillars of white marble, whence we passed into a waiting-room, immediately to the right of a distinctly imposing alabaster staircase. In this apartment the light was dim and religious, and the atmosphere had a chill solemnity. Our friend of the white kid gloves presented us with a slip of paper apiece, and indicated an inkstand on the table.

"Write our names in Illyrian," I whispered to my fellow conspirator. "They will carry more weight."

The Chief Constable inscribed his own name on the slip of paper very laboriously, in the Illyrian character. When he had accomplished this feat, I proceeded as well as in me lay, and with a deliberation quite equal to his own, to commit to paper the name of the Herr Graf Alexis von Zybnska. I was beset with much misgiving as to the correct manner of spelling it, and therefore had recourse to a number of superfluous flourishes in order to conceal my ignorance as far as possible.

When the gentleman of the white kid gloves had solemnly borne away the slips of paper, the Chief Constable proceeded to remove a bead of honest perspiration from his manly forehead.

"Of all the cursed crackbrained schemes!" he muttered. "What does the madman expect us to do now!"

"Say as little and waste as much time as we can," said I, "and at ten minutes to ten, if we are still alive, we are to make our way up that staircase."

The head of the Middleshire Constabulary subsided into incoherence mingled with profanity.

The gentleman of the white kid gloves had closed the door upon us. The gloom and the silence of the room was terribly oppressive. With ticking nerves, I made a survey of its contents. The furniture appeared to consist of a large table with massive legs, half a dozen chairs covered in red leather, a full length portrait in oils by Bruffenhauser, of his Illyrian Majesty, Ferdinand the Twelfth, in which the victor of Rodova appeared in full regalia in a gilt frame, a really magnificent-looking old gentleman; while on a separate table at the far end of the room was the Almanach de Gotha.

It began to seem that our suspense was going to last for ever. Not a sound penetrated to us from beyond the closed door. At last Coverdale took out his watch.

"Is it ten minutes to ten yet?" I enquired anxiously.

"No; it still wants a couple of minutes to half past nine."

To be condemned to support such tension for a whole twenty minutes longer was to place a term upon eternity.

"Hadn't we better open the door?" said I, "so that we can hear if anything happens."

My fellow conspirator concurred.

I opened the door accordingly and looked out in the direction of the alabaster staircase. A man was descending it in a rather languid manner. There was something curiously familiar about his appearance. As soon as he saw me standing at the foot of the stairs he quickened his pace. It was clear that he wished to speak to me.

"Keep cool," he said, and to my half-joyful bewilderment, I recognised the voice of Fitz. "You and Coverdale had better leave your overcoats in that room and go up. Go into the first room on the left on the first floor!"

With a coolness that was almost incredible, Fitz sauntered away across the wide vestibule with his hands in his pockets, while I returned to Coverdale with this latest command.

We obeyed it with a sense of relief. Anything was better than to sit counting the seconds in that funereal waiting-room. Divested of our overcoats, we went forth

up the staircase, doing our best to appear quite at ease, as though there was nothing in the least unusual in the situation.

Half-way up we were confronted with two men coming down. They looked at us with quiet intentness and seemed inclined to speak. Coverdale passed on with set gaze and rigid facial muscles, an art in which, like so many of his countrymen, he is greatly accomplished. His "Speak-to-me-if-you-dare" expression stood us in excellent stead. The two men passed down the stairs without venturing to address us, and we went up.

The first room on the left, on the first floor, was a larger and more cheerful apartment than the one from which we had come. It was better lit; there was a bright fire, and it was furnished with taste, after the fashion of a drawing-room. There were books, photographs, and a piano.

The room was empty, but we had been in it scarcely a minute when a servant entered to offer us coffee. We did not disdain the ambassadorial bounty. Excellent coffee it was.

We were toying with this refreshment when a stealthy rustle apprised us that we were also about to receive the indulgence of feminine society. A young woman, tall and graceful, and charmingly gowned, came into the room with a sheet of music in her hand. The presence of a pair of total strangers did not embarrass her.

"Do you like Schubert?" said she with a delightful foreign intonation.

"I think Schubert is charming," said I, with heartiness and promptitude.

The lady flashed her teeth in a rare smile and sat down at the piano. I arranged her music with a care that was rather elaborate.

It was not Schubert, however, that she began to play, but a haunting little "Impromptu" of Schumann's. Her playing was good to listen to, for her touch was highly educated; also it was fascinating to watch her movements since she was an extremely graceful and vivid work of nature.

Very assiduously I turned over her music. The occupation in itself was pleasant; also it seemed to give some sort of sanction to our unlawful presence. Coverdale with his hands tucked deep in his pockets, appeared to listen most critically to the lady's playing; although, as I have heard him declare himself, the only form of music that appeals to him is "a really good brass band."

In the course of the performance of Schumann's "Impromptu" the audience of the fair pianiste gained in number and authority. Like the famous Pied Piper of Hamelin, the thrilling delicacy of her touch began to entice quaint beasts from their lair. Alexander O'Mulligan sauntered into the drawing-room at about the fourth bar. He wore his most seraphic grin, and his ears were spread to catch the most illusive chords of melody. He gave Coverdale a jovial nod and winked at me. It was clear that the amateur middle weight champion of Great Britain was enjoying himself immensely.

Hardly had Alexander O'Mulligan advised us of his genial presence, when Brasset and my relation by marriage came in upon tiptoe. The sight of us all with

an unknown lady discoursing Schumann for our benefit was doubtless as reassuring as it was unexpected. In the emotion of the moment Jodey gave the amateur middle weight champion a fraternal dig in the ribs.

However, our party could not be considered complete without the presence of the chief gamester. The "Impromptu" had run its course and the gracious lady at the piano had been prevailed upon to play something of Brahms', when the master mind, whose arrival we were nervously awaiting, appeared once more upon the scene. Fitz came into the room looking every inch the Man of Destiny.

CHAPTER XII

THE MAN OF DESTINY

It was not in looks alone that Fitz resembled the Man of Destiny. The peremptory decision of his manner fitted him for the part. The beautiful musician and her subtle cadences were significant to him only in so far as they could serve his will. Fitz entered in the midst of a rhapsody played divinely; and with an unconcerned air he went straight up to the piano, and, with Napoleonic effrontery, placed his elbow across the music.

"Sorry to interrupt you, Countess, but there is no time to lose."

The Countess lifted her fingers from the keys, and her teeth flashed in a smile, that had an edge to it.

A shrug of the shoulders from the pianiste; and Fitz began to talk with considerable volubility in his fluent Illyrian. My nurture has been expensive; and on the admirable English principle of the more you pay for your education the less practical knowledge you acquire, let it cause no surprise that my acquaintance with the Illyrian tongue is limited to a few expletives. Therefore I was unable to follow the course of Fitz's conversation.

Perforce I had to be content with watching his play of gesture. This, too, was considerable. The air of

languor which it had pleased him to assume in the crisis of his fate was laid aside in favour of a wonderful ardour and conviction. He drummed his fingers on the top of the piano and urged his views with a fervour that might have moved the Sphinx.

At first the fair musician did not seem prepared to take Fitz seriously. Her smile was arch, and inclined to be playful. But Fitz was in an epic mood.

He had not come so far upon a momentous enterprise to be gainsaid by a woman's levity. The man began to wax tremendous. He kept his voice low, but the veins swelled in his forehead, and he beat the palm of his right hand with the fist of his left.

Before such a force of nature no woman could be expected to maintain her negative attitude. Fitz's Illyrian became volcanic. In the end, the lady at the piano spread her hands, said "Hein!" and rose from the music stool. A moment she stood irresolute, but the gaze upon her was that of a serpent fixed upon the eyes of a bird. The man's determination had won the day. For clearly at his behest, she quitted the room, and Fitz, white and tense, yet with blazing eyes, followed her.

For the moment it seemed that he had forgotten his fellow conspirators. But as soon as he had passed out of the room, he turned back.

"Stay where you are," he said. "You will be wanted presently."

The five of us were left staring after him through the open door of the drawing-room. It was the Chief Constable who broke the silence.

"What's his game now?"

"He appears to be engaged in convincing a woman against her will," said I. "Were you able to follow the conversation?"

"Not altogether. He appears to have made up his mind that Madame shall do something, and Madame appears to have made up hers that she won't. But exactly what it is, I can't say. I don't mind betting a shilling all the same, that the damned fellow will get his way. Upon my word I have never seen his equal!"

The Chief Constable laughed in a hollow voice, and removed another bead of honest perspiration from his countenance.

Fitz's departure with the Countess marked the renewal of our suspense. Here were the five of us landed indefinitely, biting our thumbs. The situation was rather absurd. Five law-abiding Englishmen assembled with fell intent in a private house, yet knowing very little of the business they had on hand. Each had made his way by stealth, and under false pretences, into the very heart of the place. In this comfortable drawing-room we had no *locus standi* at all. To all in the establishment we were total strangers, and to us they were equally strange.

Would Fitz never return? Would the call to action never be made? A man with a high forehead and the look of an official came to the threshold of the room, looked in upon us pensively, and then went away again. Two minutes later, a second individual repeated the performance. Doubtless we were five strange and un-

expected birds—but the whole business was beginning to be ridiculous.

I looked at my watch. It was twenty-five minutes past ten. Then the undefeated O'Mulligan sat down at the piano and began to play the latest masterpiece in vogue at the Tivoli. The strains of his searching melody had the effect of bringing to us another servant with a further supply of coffee.

"Can you tell me if the Ambassador is dining out to-night?" I said to the servant.

"Yes, sir," said the man who was English. "At Buckingham Palace, but he will be home before eleven."

"Is the Crown Princess dining there also?"

"No, sir, I believe not."

"She is in the suite of rooms on the next floor?" I said carelessly.

"Yes, sir."

When the man had withdrawn I was congratulated.

"Well done, you!" said Coverdale. "Useful information."

"I wonder if Fitz knows as much," said I.

"Of course he does. The infernal fellow has thought this thing out pretty well. He knows the game he's playing."

This was reassuring from one whose habit was averse from optimism.

Inspired with the knowledge that his Excellency was dining at Buckingham Palace, Alexander O'Mulligan began to pound away more heartily than ever upon the upright grand.

"Give your imitation of church bells and a barrel

organ, Alec," said a humble admirer, insinuating a trifle more ease into his bearing.

"Do you think they will mind if we smoke here?" said Brasset, plaintively. "I am dying for a cigarette."

However, before the Master of the Crackanthorpe could have recourse to this aid to his existence, Fitz returned. He was alone, and he was peremptory.

"What an infernal din you fellows kick up!" He fixed his dæmonic gaze upon the amateur middle weight champion. "Leave that piano and come and be presented to my wife."

At last we were coming to the horses. There was a perceptible squaring of shoulders and a shooting of cuffs, and then Fitz led the way out of the room, followed by Coverdale and the rest of us in review order. We were conducted up another marble staircase and along a lengthy corridor, through a succession of reception-rooms, until at last we found ourselves in an apartment larger and more ornate than all the others. Its sombre richness was truly imposing. Pictures, tapestry, candelabra, carpets and furniture all combined to give it the air of a state chamber.

Three ladies were seated at the far end of this magnificent room. One was the fair musician upon whom Fitz had imposed his will; another was a mature and stately dame, with snow-white hair and patrician features; and the third, reclining upon a chair with a high gilt back, was the "Stormy Petrel," the Crown Princess of Illyria.

As soon as we came into the room the two other ladies rose, leaving the Princess seated in state. Fitz

presented each of us with all the formality that the most sensitive royalty could have desired. His manner of recommending us to Her Royal Highness was dignified, authoritative and not without grace. As far as we were concerned, I hope our bearing was not lacking in the necessary punctilio.

Hitherto it had been our privilege to see Mrs. Fitz out hunting in her famous scarlet coat, when to be sure, she had been the centre of much critical observation. But at such times the princess was merged in the brilliant horsewoman; and it goes to prove how easily "the real thing" may pass for the mere audacity of the intrepid adventuress, if one comes to consider that the bearing of "the circus rider from Vienna" awoke no suspicions in respect of her status.

It would be easy to indulge in a page of reflection upon the subject of Mrs. Fitz. Her style was quite as pronounced in the saddle as it was in the salon, but the experts in that elusive quality had failed, as they do occasionally, to appreciate its authenticity. Doubtless they would have failed again to render the genuine thing its meed, had we not the assurance of Fitz that we were in the presence of the heiress to the oldest monarchy in Europe.

It is time I attempted to describe this noble creature. But it is vain to seek to portray a great work of nature. Above all else I think she must be regarded as that. She was prodigal in beauty; imperious in the vividness of her challenge; splendid in the arresting candour of her dark and disdainful eyes. There was a compelling power before which the world of men and things was

prone to yield; but there was pathos too in that valiant self-security, which knew so little yet exacted so much; and beyond all else there was the immemorial fascination of a luckless, intensely sentient being, who seemed in her own person to be the epitome of an entire sex at the dawn of the twentieth century.

One by one we paid our homage, and it was not rendered less by the romance of the circumstances.

"You are brave men!" she said in a voice wonderfully low and clear in quality. "We Svelkes have known always how to esteem men of courage."

Coverdale, as the doyen of the party, took upon himself to speak for us. He held himself erect and bowed much too stiffly to pass muster as a courtier. But he had a kind of plain, almost rough, sincerity which atoned a little for his resolute absence of grace.

"If we are to have the privilege, ma'am," said the Chief Constable, "of making ourselves useful, I am sure we shall all feel very proud and honoured."

There is often something rather charming in a plain man's attempt at the ornate. So honourable an awkwardness caused the eyes of her Royal Highness to glow with humour and kindliness.

"*Mais oui, mon cher*, I know it well, *les Anglais sont hommes honnêtes.*" Suddenly she laughed quite charmingly, and enfolded the six of us in a glance of the highest benevolence, with which, doubtless, her favourite dogs and horses had often been indulged. "Do you know, there is something in *les Anglais* that I like much. Quiet fellows, eh, always a little *bête*, but so—so trustworthy. Yes, I like them much."

There was something soft and quaint and entirely captivating in the accent of her Royal Highness. The smile in her eyes was frankness itself.

"I hope, ma'am," said the Chief Constable, still labouring valiantly with his politeness, "that we shall deserve praise."

The princess continued to smile. A very characteristic smile it was. A little girl admiring her array of dolls, or old Frederick of Prussia reviewing his regiment of giants, might have been expected to indulge in a very similar gesture. We were honest Englishmen, quiet fellows, a little *bête,* who were always to be trusted; and her *naïveté* was such, that it was bound to inform us of these facts.

"You must know my ladies. They will like to know you, I am sure."

The elder was the Margravine of Lesser Grabia; the fair admirer of Strauss the Countess Etta von Zweidelheim. The bows were profound; and not for a moment, did the look of high indulgence quit the face of her Royal Highness.

"The Margravine is a dear good creature, Colonel Coverdale. Many times she has helped me when I could not do my sums. I never could do sums, because I always thought they were stupid. But she is such a kind faithful soul, my dear Colonel, and not at all stupid, like the sums she used to set me. As for her cooking, it is excellent. If you are not otherwise engaged, my dear Colonel, I should recommend you to marry her."

The younger section of her Royal Highness's body-

guard, Brasset, Jodey and O'Mulligan, gave ground abruptly. The amateur middle weight champion of Great Britain nearly disgraced us all by choking audibly. But really the expression of blank dismay upon the weather-beaten countenance of the Chief Constable was stupendous. However, his presence of mind and his courtier-like politeness did not for a moment desert him.

"Delighted, I'm sure," he murmured.

"I feel sure, a man so brave as Colonel Coverdale has a good wife already," said the lady of the patrician features, speaking excellent English with great amiability.

A further development of this alluring topic was precluded by the entrance of a fourth lady into the room. She carried an opera cloak. Clearly this was designed for the use of the Princess.

Her Royal Highness however preferred to tarry. Fitz hovering round her chair found it hard to veil his impatience. Too plainly the delay which was wanton and unnecessary was setting his nerves on edge. His wife must have been conscious of it since she patted his sleeve with an air at once soothing and maternal. Nevertheless she shewed no haste to forego the comfort of the room or the pleasure of the society in which she sat.

"I was hoping," said Fitz, "that we could get away before the return of von Arlenberg."

The smile of the Princess was of rare brilliancy.

"Ah yes, the dear Baron. Perhaps it is better."

Fitz took the cloak from the hands of the lady, but

before he could place it around his wife's shoulders voices were heard at the far end of the long room.

Three men had entered.

The first of these to approach us was a tall, stout and florid personage wearing full Court dress and so many decorations that he looked like a caricature. Certainly he was a magnificent figure of a man, but at this moment a little lacking in serenity. His face showed traces of a consternation that would have been almost comic had it not been rather painful. At the sight of the six of us he spread out his hands and gesticulated to those who had come with him into the room.

In an undertone he said something in Illyrian, which I did not understand.

In striking contrast to the perturbation of the Ambassador, the manner of the Princess was as amiable and composed as if she were seated in the castle at Blaenau.

"Ah, Baron, you have dined well?"

"Excellently madam, excellently!" said the Ambassador. The consternation in his face was slowly deepening.

"*Trés bien;* it is well. I have heard my father say that cooking was the only art in which the good English are not quite perfect. And *le bon roi Edouard,* I hope he is in good health?"

"In robust health, madam, in robust health."

The dismay in the eyes of the Ambassador was rather tragic. His gaze was travelling constantly to meet that of his two companions, stolid men who yet were

at a loss to conceal their uneasiness. On the other hand, the air of the Princess was charmingly cool and *dégagé*.

"Baron," said she, "do you know my husband?"

Her smile, as she spoke, acquired a malice that made one think of a sword.

"Madam, I have not the privilege," said the Ambassador coldly.

Somehow the manner of the reply gave one an enlarged idea of his Excellency's calibre. If in such a situation it is permissible for a humble spectator to speak of himself, I felt my throat tighten and my heart begin to beat.

"Well, Baron," said the Princess, "it is a privilege that I am sure you covet. His Excellency the Herr Baron von Arlenberg, my dear father's representative in England, Mr. Nevil Fitzwaren, squire of Broadfields, in the County of Middleham."

The Ambassador bowed gravely and then held out his hand.

Fitz returned the bow of Ferdinand the Twelfth's representative slightly and curtly, but ignored his hand altogether.

CHAPTER XIII

FURTHER PASSAGES AT NO. 300 PORTLAND PLACE

THE Princess was amused.

"Aha, *les Anglais! Très bon enfants!*"

The royal eyebrows had an uplift of mischievous pleasure.

"And this, dear Baron," said her Royal Highness, "is my good friend Colonel Coverdale, who has smelt powder in the wars of his country."

Fitz's open rudeness seemed to help the Ambassador to sustain his poise. He bowed and offered his hand to the Chief Constable in a fashion precisely similar to that he had used to the husband of the Princess.

The Chief Constable shook hands with the Ambassador. It was amusing to observe the manner in which each of these big dogs looked over the other. The representative of Ferdinand the Twelfth was a man of greater calibre than his first appearance had led us to believe.

"It is pleasant, madam," said he, "to find you surrounded by your English friends."

The dark eyes brimmed with meaning.

"Confess, Baron, that you did not think I had so many."

"Your Royal Highness is not kind to my intelligence," said his Excellency.

"Confess, then, you did not think that such was their courage?"

"I will perjure myself if your Royal Highness desires it." The Ambassador's laugh was not so gay in effect as it was in intention. "But could I believe that you would admit any save the bravest to your friendship?"

"Then you recognise, Baron, that my friends are brave?"

"Unquestionably, madam, they are brave."

"Explain then, Baron, why you did not guard the doors of my prison? For what reason, when you went out to dine this evening, did you forget to lock them and put the keys in your pocket?"

Before the subtle laughter in the eyes of his questioner the Ambassador lowered his gaze.

"I trust your Royal Highness does not feel that one of the oldest, if one of the humblest, servants of the good King, has so little regard for your Royal Highness as to seek to debar her from the simplest of pleasures?"

"It has not occurred to your Excellency that that of which you speak as the simplest of pleasures may prove for yourself the greatest of calamities?"

At this point the Ambassador was tempted to dissemble.

"I am at a loss, madam, to read your thoughts."

"Liar!" muttered Fitz in my ear.

"Your Excellency appears to have a store of natural simplicity," said the Princess.

The Ambassador bowed.

"Is it not a great thing to have, madam, in these days?"

"Has it not occurred to your Excellency that it is a luxury that those who would serve their Sovereign occasionally deny themselves?"

"If it pleases your Royal Highness to exercise your delightful wit at the expense of the humblest servant of the good King!"

"It does not please me, Excellency. It grieves me to the heart."

With an address that was remarkable the Princess changed her tone. Quite suddenly the clear and mellow inflection of light banter was exchanged for one of coldly-wrought reproof.

"I am sorry, madam," said the Ambassador simply and with sincerity; "I am a thousand times sorry. I can never forgive myself if I have wounded the susceptibilities of your Royal Highness. Already I had hoped I had made it clear that the least of your servants has not been a free agent in all that has been done. I am the humble instrument of an august master."

"I agree with you, Herr Baron, that the King in his wisdom cannot do wrong. But it is because you have betrayed the service of your master that I am unhappy."

The Herr Baron lowered his eyes.

"Please God," he said humbly, "the least of the King's servants will never betray the service of him to whom he owes everything."

The Princess laughed, a little cruelly.

"Speeches, Baron," said she.

"Will your Royal Highness deign to explain in what manner I have betrayed the service of my master?"

"If you press the question, I will answer it. At the command of the King, you take me by force and you imprison me in your house until that hour in which I can be removed to the Castle at Blaenau. And then in an unlucky moment, you open the door of my cage, and I am once again a free person in the company of my friends."

The Princess rose abruptly and with a disdain that was like a rapier suffered Fitz to place the cloak about her shoulders.

The Ambassador retained his self-possession. In his bearing, in the cold lustre of his eyes, in the rigidity of the jaw, were the evidences of an inflexible will.

"The orders, madam, of the King, my master, are explicit," he said in a low voice. "It grieves me bitterly that I cannot suffer them to be set aside."

"So be it, Herr Baron." The great dark eyes of the Princess transfixed the Ambassador like a pair of swords.

In the midst of these passages Fitz reassumed his rôle of *generalissimo*.

"Arbuthnot," he whispered to me, "you and Brasset and Vane-Anstruther guard the farthest door. Let no one enter or pass out. Coverdale and O'Mulligan will look after the other one."

In silence and without ostentation, we disposed ourselves accordingly. Clearly it had not occurred to the Ambassador to expect compulsion to be levied in his

own house, by half a dozen commonplace civilians in black coats.

We had hardly taken up our places when Fitz, who stood by the side of the Princess, received from her a look that was also a command. Thereupon for the first time, he deigned to address the Ambassador.

"Baron von Arlenberg," he said, "the friends of her Royal Highness have no wish to use *force majeure*, but her Royal Highness desires me to inform you that she has it at her disposal. All the same, she is hopeful that your natural good sense will spare her the necessity of employing it."

Fitz's words were well spoken, but his tone, scrupulously restrained as it was, had an undercurrent of menace that the Ambassador and his two secretaries could hardly fail to detect. The cold eyes of his Excellency seemed to blaze with fury, but he made no reply.

The Princess took the arm of her husband, and moved a pace in the direction of the farther door. At the same moment the Ambassador made a movement to the left where a bell rope hung from the wall.

"Baron von Arlenberg," said Fitz in a tone that compelled him to stay where he was; "if you touch that rope I shall blow out your brains."

Fitz had the revolver in his hand already. He covered the Ambassador imperturbably. The two secretaries, although confused by the swiftness of the act, moved forward.

"Keep away from the bell rope, gentlemen," said Fitz. "I shall not hesitate."

The secretaries halted indecisively beside their chief, and as they did so, Coverdale left his post by the nearer door, and revolver in hand, solemnly mounted guard over the bell rope.

"I am afraid, gentlemen," said Fitz, "you have no choice other than to respect the wishes of the Princess. And she desires that you stay in this room until she has left the Embassy."

However, with all his coolness, Fitz had made two important miscalculations. On the right there was another bell rope and there was also the lady of the silver hair, the Margravine of Lesser Grabia. I sprang from my post, and literally wrenched the rope from her fingers, but not before she had pulled it as hard as she could.

Escorted by Fitz, the Princess passed out of the room, while the friends of her Royal Highness assumed an aspect of quiet but determined hostility, in order to prevent the Ambassador, his secretaries, the Margravine who looked furious, and the fair player of Schumann, who appeared to be consumed with mirth, from following her.

Hardly had the Princess passed through the farther door, which Brasset and Jodey had the honour of holding for her, before the Countess Etta von Zweidelheim collapsed upon a convenient sofa.

"It is better than Offenbach!" she said, beginning to weep softly.

Whether it was actually better than Offenbach, I am not competent to affirm, but I can answer for it that for all except that charming but risible lady it

was a great deal more serious. The Ambassador was a brave man, and he had strength of will, but as becomes one of his calling he was in no sense a fool. He had seen that in the eyes of Fitz which had assured him that a too-punctilious regard for the will of his Sovereign would not only be futile, but indiscreet. And no sooner had Fitz and the royal lady vanished from his ken, than there were Coverdale and the rest of us to contend with.

The Chief Constable with his back to the wall, even without a firearm in his stolid fist, is a very considerable figure of a man who will not brook nonsense from anybody. Then Alexander O'Mulligan, by the farther door, had a personality by no means deficient in persuasiveness.

Scarcely had the Princess departed before O'Mulligan's door was tried from without. The amateur middle weight champion of Great Britain set his back against it with great success.

"Help! help!" called the Margravine in a deep bay which it seemed to our alarmed ears must have been audible for half a mile. "Save the Princess! Help! Help!"

In response to the appeal, a greater and ever-increasing pressure was brought to bear upon the door. The hinges groaned, and the panels trembled; and at last Alexander O'Mulligan suddenly withdrew his weight, and divers persons tumbled headlong, one over another, pell mell into the room.

"I think we had better go," said Coverdale, in the midst of this chaos.

The five remaining champions of the Princess's free-

dom gathered together, and, their weapons still in hand, withdrew in excellent order. But one resplendent apartment led to another, equally resplendent, and amid the labyrinth of doors and corridors, we could not find the staircase. And immediately behind us the outraged Ambassador and his retinue were gaining every instant in numbers and *morale.*

The situation was ludicrous, yet not without its peril. It was hard to know what would happen, and there was very little time in which to form a conjecture. Besides it was of great importance that we should find our way downstairs without delay, for our presence there might be sorely needed.

As it happened, our thanks were due to the Ambassador, that we were able to find the staircase. For he and a number of excited persons flocked past us and pointed a direct course thereto. They got down first, but we followed hard upon their heels.

On the ground floor all was peace. The men in livery and divers stray officials were serenely unconscious of what had occurred. Fitz had donned his overcoat, and with stupendous coolness was preparing to depart. Just as the Ambassador came into view, he led the Princess into the outer vestibule.

"They can't stop 'em now," said Coverdale. "We had better look after our coats and hats, and then find our way to the Savoy."

This was true enough, for the door leading to the street was already open.

Waiting by the kerb was an electric brougham which Fitz had had the forethought to provide. Coverdale

and I retrieved our property from the waiting room at the foot of the staircase, while the others went in search of theirs; and so quickly was this accomplished, that we were able to witness an incident that was not the least memorable of the many of that amazing evening.

The Ambassador realised that the game was lost as soon as he saw the open door and the brougham in readiness. Therefore he refrained from passing beyond the inner vestibule. It is expected of an ambassador that he shall do no hurt to his dignity in the most exacting situations.

But there is an astonishing incident still to be recorded. Fitz having placed the Princess in safety in the brougham, returned into the house. Walking straight up to the Ambassador, he addressed him in terms of measured insult.

"You cowardly dog," he said. "I would shoot you like a cur if it were not for the laws of the country. You are not worth hanging for. But I will meet you at Paris at the first opportunity. Here is my card."

Before he could be prevented he gave the Ambassador a blow upon the cheek with his open hand. It was not heavy, but it was premeditated.

The members of the Embassy closed around Fitz.

"Come into the ballroom, sir," said the Ambassador, who had turned deadly pale.

"When I have seen the Princess into safety, I will oblige you," said Fitz. "But it would be more convenient if we arranged a meeting at Paris."

"You shall meet me now, sir," said the Ambassador.

Coverdale moved forward into the circle that had been formed.

"I am afraid that is impossible," said the Chief Constable. "The practice of duelling has no sanction in this country. For all concerned, it will surely be more convenient to meet at Paris."

Coverdale's intention was pacific, and he is a man of weight, but the principals in this affair were likely to be too much for him.

"Arbuthnot," said Fitz, "be good enough to accompany the Princess to the Savoy. We will come on presently."

For a moment the issue hung in the balance. The Ambassador had demanded satisfaction and Fitz was more than willing to grant it. But Coverdale was equally resolute. To the best of my capacity I seconded his efforts, but with men so headstrong and implacable it was almost impossible to exert any kind of authority.

"If you don't care to support me," said Fitz, to Coverdale, "perhaps you will not mind taking the place of Arbuthnot. I daresay you other fellows will come on to the ballroom."

To our dismay, Fitz, with a reassumption of the Napoleonic manner, turned toward the staircase.

"What is to be done?" I inquired of the Chief Constable anxiously. "I am a man of peace myself, but one of us must see him through."

"I agree with you—the cursed firebrand! But one of us must stay, and the other must look after the Princess."

The Chief Constable did not conceal the fact that he had a predilection for the latter duty.

"I don't know much about affairs of honour," said I, "and I should greatly prefer that a man of more experience took a thing like this in hand; but I can quite believe that your official position——"

"Official position be damned!" said the Chief Constable. "If you honestly think I shall be of more use than you, there is no more to be said. We are here to make ourselves useful and we must see this thing through."

"Very well, I will look after the Princess, and you go to the ballroom and do what you can to save the situation."

CHAPTER XIV

A DEPLORABLE INCIDENT

It was with a feeling akin to despair that I saw Coverdale follow the others up the stairs. In the first place my own position was invidious. But there was nothing to be done. It was beyond question that Fitz must have a tried man like Coverdale at his elbow, whilst also it was necessary that a person with some pretensions to responsibility should take charge of the lady who was safely outside in the electric brougham. Yet, uppermost in my thoughts, was a more insistent care. The affair had taken a very ugly turn. Fitz had shown himself to be a man who did not stick at trifles, whilst von Arlenberg, unless his manner belied him, was cast in a similar mould.

It was therefore with some uneasiness, that I went to offer my services to her Royal Highness. That distinguished personage was seated greatly at her ease, yet with a slight frown upon her somewhat imperious countenance.

"Where is Nefil?" said she.

"I have to tell you, ma'am," said I, "that Mr. Fitzwaren is—er—discussing certain important matters with his Excellency, and that if it is agreeable to you he desires me to accompany you to your hotel."

"What are the matters?" Her gaze in its directness seemed to pass right through me.

"There are—er—certain details that have to be adjusted."

"Well I hope Nefil will be able to shoot straight."

Whether I was more taken aback by the cynicism of the remark or by its sagacity, it would be fruitless to inquire. But to this pious hope I had nothing to add; and I stood feeling decidedly uncomfortable at the door of the car. There was no room in front by the side of the chauffeur, and I had received no invitation to take a seat within.

The pause was awkward, but somehow there seemed to be no help for it.

"Well?" said the lady, not without a suspicion of acerbity.

Even that I could not take for an invitation to get in. I stood acutely conscious that my embarrassment told against me.

"Aha, *les Anglais!*" The malice was not too genial. "Would you haf me open the door?"

I told the chauffeur to drive to the Savoy, and took the proffered seat by the side of the Crown Princess of Illyria.

The discovery has no claim to be original, but in order to find out what a woman really is, one should sit with her alone and *tête-à-tête*. The opportunity for frankness is not likely to be neglected upon either side, since a display of that engaging quality upon the one part seems automatically to evoke it on the other.

No sooner was I seated by the side of Mrs. Fitz than

I felt more at ease. She was so sentient, so responsive; a creature who, beneath the trenchant reserve of her manner, was alive in every nerve.

She patted my knees with her fan.

"Aha, *les Anglais!*" In the light of the lamps, I thought her eyes were like stars. "So brave, so honest and so *bête*—I love them all!"

The spell of her presence seemed to overpower me.

"My brave Nefil will kill him, will he not?"

"I fear," said I, "that one of them will not see to-morrow."

"Indeed, yes; it cannot be otherwise."

Her calmness amazed me. And yet there was nothing callous or unnatural in it. Perhaps it might be described as the outward expression of an imperial nature. At least that was the impression that I gained. When her servants drew their swords in her cause they must not look for a prick in the arm. Let them prepare to stake their lives and to yield them gladly. I shivered slightly; it was barbarous that a woman could thus offer the father of her children to the gods, yet it was sublime.

All too soon we arrived at the restaurant where Fitz had ordered supper for seven. The place was filling up rapidly after the theatres. We sat on a sofa in the foyer to wait for our party; I, with an acute anxiety and a sense of foreboding that held me tongue-tied; my companion, with a detachment of mind that in the circumstances seemed almost inhuman. For her sake a man was being done to death; one whom she loved, or one whom her father honoured. But whatever Fate's

decree, her nature was schooled to the point of submission.

Seated by my side in the foyer, she subjected the throng of returning playgoers to a frankly humorous and malicious scrutiny. These English who were so *bête* amused her vastly. The clothes they wore, the airs they gave themselves, the things they did and the things they refrained from doing, not a detail escaped that audaciously frank, that alertly curious intelligence.

"Your women are not as you, you fine, big English good dogs," she said, bestowing another indulgent pat upon my knees. "*Les Anglaises,* how prim and pinched they are, what dresses they wear, and how they do walk! But I adore *vos jolis hommes;* was ever such distinction, such charm, such stupidity! *Mon père* shall have an English regiment. I will raise it myself, and be its colonel."

Her laughter was deep and rich and full of malice. Even I, stupid and stricken with fear as I was, was yet sufficiently indiscreet to attempt to seize the opportunity.

"It will be the easiest thing in the world, ma'am. Have you not raised it already?"

Another indulgent pat was my reward.

"*Très bon enfant! Quel esprit!* You shall sit by my side when we eat."

Her ridicule had a velvet sheath, but even an Englishman, who felt as miserably ineffectual as did I, was susceptible of the thrust.

It is difficult for the average Briton, acutely conscious that he is enduring the patronage of a superior, to be

easy, graceful and natural in his bearing; to say the appropriate things in the appropriate way, and to carry off the situation lightly. Every moment that I sat by the side of her Royal Highness in the centre of the public gaze, I felt my position to be growing more invidious. The pose of my companion seemed to become more Olympian; while if I ventured a half-hearted *riposte* or a timid pleasantry, I suffered for it; or if I remained silent and respectful, and that after all is the only course to take in the presence of our betters, I furnished an additional example of the heaviness of my countrymen.

I came to the conclusion that the less I said the better it would fare with my over-sensitive dignity, but even the utterance of an occasional monosyllable did not save me.

"When I hear the big dogs growl, the English masteefs, I say to myself, 'Ah, the dear fellows, how excellently they speak the language!'"

Unless one springs from the Chosen Race, it takes more than three generations to produce a courtier. I felt myself to be growing stiffer and generally more infelicitous in my demeanour. And then, as if to complete my overthrow, there entered the foyer, a supper-party, whose appearance on the scene I could only regard with horror.

Who has not felt that among the astral bodies there is a malign power, a kind of Court Dramatist, who arranges sinister coincidences and mischievous surprises for us humble denizens below, in order to divert the privileged onlookers sitting in heaven. The supper-

party which came into our midst, which looked as though it had been to see "The Importance of Being Earnest," and had been shocked by its reprehensible levity, consisted of Dumbarton, our illustrious neighbour, "dear Evelyn" high of coiffure, and robed in pink satin, the august Mrs. Catesby, and the highly respectable George, with one or two others of minor importance as far as this narrative is concerned, although in other spheres not prone to yield pride of place to anybody.

It was clear from the rigid, slow and undeviating manner in which the ducal party walked past our sofa, that we were discovered. Mrs. Catesby, in particular, gazed down her nose with really awful solemnity; George, the highly respectable, wearing his Quarter Sessions expression; Dumbarton, looking like a Royal Duke painted in oils; and "dear Evelyn," his pink-robed spouse, a really admirable picture of what can be achieved in the way of high-bred hauteur. I can only say, that speaking for myself, I addressed a humble prayer to heaven, that the floor might open and let me through.

A chill of apprehension settled upon me. I sat very close, not daring to move an eyelid.

Alas! as the procession filed past, there arose a note of derision; a clear, resonant, bell-like note.

"Ach, pink! Pink in dis climate and wis dat complexion!"

Even the *chef de reception* was compelled to follow the example of Mrs. Catesby of looking down his nose with really awful solemnity.

The sweat sprang to my miserable forehead. I never have a nightmare now without I dream of pink satin. The ducal party passed beyond our ken, leaving me shattered utterly and more than ever at the mercy of my companion. However, to my relief, "The Stormy Petrel" began to betray a care in regard to her husband. It began to seem that the aim of his adversary had been the straighter.

Fitz was certainly a desperate fellow, and my intercourse with the lady whom he had prevailed upon to share his name, rendered that aspect of his character the more clear. What enormous grit the man must have to abduct such a lioness and to attempt to keep house with her upon a basis of equality. But had he met his overthrow at last? Had he tempted fate once too often? The hands of the clock were creeping on towards midnight.

"Nefil has missed his aim." The voice of the Princess trembled.

Almost immediately, however, this was proved to be not the case. There were further arrivals in the foyer; five men entered together, and the first of these was Fitz.

It may have been the fault of my overwrought fancy, but it seemed to me that each of the five was looking excited and pale. My companion rose to receive them.

"It is well," she said. "It is well." She turned to Fitz who looked ghastly, and extended her hand with a gesture that I can only compare to that of Medusa.

Fitz bore the hand to his lips.

"What happened?" I said to Coverdale in a hoarse whisper.

"Don't ask!" he said, half turning away.

"Do you mean——" I said; but the sentence died in my throat.

The invasion of the supper room was a pretty grave ordeal to have to face. The stress of that day, woven of the very tissue of excitement, had told upon me; and again I was in the grip of a nameless fear. Instead of following in the train of Mrs. Fitz into the glare of a too notorious publicity, I wanted to run away and hide myself.

The room was crowded with people who were there to see and to be seen. We had to make our way past a number of tables to one reserved for us at the far end of the room. In the middle of our progress, like a lion in the gate, was the ducal party toying elegantly with quails and champagne.

Each member of her Royal Highness's bodyguard, including the indomitable O'Mulligan, was looking downcast and unhappy and far from his best. But the lady herself, in bearing and in manner, made no secret of her status. She was the Heiress-Apparent to Europe's oldest monarchy condescending to eat in the midst of barbarians.

It was clear that the ducal party was fully determined to take an extreme course. By the animation of its conversation and its assiduous regard for quails and champagne, it evidently hoped to make the fact quite plain that our privacy would be respected if only we had the decency to extend a like indulgence to theirs.

Alas! in certain kinds of warfare there are no sanctities.

"Ach, pink!" said Mrs. Fitz, in that voice which had such a terrible quality of penetration. "Can anyone tell me *why* pink——"

The nervous fancy of a married man, a father of a family and a county member seemed to detect a titter from the adjoining tables. Coverdale pressed forward sombrely. Her Royal Highness, instinct with a ruthless and humorous disdain, went forward too. Fitz however, lingered a moment, and touched his distinguished neighbour upon the shoulder with incredible Napoleonic heartiness.

"Hullo, Duke!" he said.

"How are you, Fitzwaren?" said the great man, in a voice that seemed to come out of his shoes.

"Never mind the Missus!" said the Man of Destiny with a comic half-cock of the left eye at the patrician aspect of her Grace. "It's only her fun."

The man's effrontery, his cynicism, his absence of taste were staggering. But what a sublime courage the fellow had. On he sauntered with his hands buried in his pockets, in the wake of Coverdale and her Royal Highness. Brasset and I, walking delicately, were crowding upon his heels, when what can only be described as a peremptory and insistent hiss recalled us to the danger zone.

"Reggie! Odo Arbuthnot!"

We proffered a forlorn salute to the most august of her sex.

"Beg pardon, Mrs. Catesby, didn't see you, y'know."

Brasset's apologetic feebleness was in singular and painful contrast to the epic breadth of the inconceivable Fitz.

"Don't dare to offer me a word, either of you," said the Great Lady, in a whisper of Homeric truculence. "You are committing the act of social suicide. When I think of your mother, Reggie, and of your wife and daughter, Odo Arbuthnot, I—but I will say nothing. But it is social suicide for all of you, including that fatuous police constable.

The flesh cannot endure more than a given amount of suffering, although the measure of its capacity is so terrible. But whatever it was, I was already past it.

"Pink is certainly a trying colour," I whispered.

"Dear Evelyn will never forgive it. Have none of you a sense of decency? It is madness!"

I agreed that it was, and retreated limply to the next table but two.

Our supper party should have been a dismal function, but somehow it was not. It was only reasonable to assume that some fell occurrence had taken place at the Embassy, but whatever its nature was, its witnesses began to pull themselves together under the magnetic influence of Mrs. Fitz. Her imperious gaiety, if it did not wholly banish Coverdale's abysmal gloom, did much to make it less. As for the other members of the party, conscience-stricken and uneasy at heart as they were, it was impossible not to respond to her power.

Even the Master of Crackanthorpe, whose sense of humour is of a decidedly primitive order, indulged in a loud guffaw at one of her pungent remarks.

"Restrain yourself, my dear fellow, for heaven's sake!" I admonished him. "Dumbarton is already looking like doom. Your presence here has already cost the poultry fund fifty pounds, see if it hasn't. If he hears you laugh in that way he will close his covers and stick up wire."

"Don't care what he does!" said the Master of the Crackanthorpe, with an unnatural brightness in his eyes.

The siren had indeed a terrible power. The imperious glance, the distended nostril, the mobile lips, the skin of gleaming olive, the whole figure vivid with the entrancing charm of sex and the romance of ages—who were we, *les hommes moyens sensuels*, that we should have the strength of soul to resist it all? Nature had fashioned a sorceress; and when she takes the trouble to do that, she bestows, as a rule, a consciousness of power upon her chosen instrument, and the determination to wield it ruthlessly. We drained our glasses and basked in her smiles.

Our laughter waxed higher; our joy in her presence the more unguarded. I retained discretion enough to be aware that no detail of our conduct was lost upon the august party two tables away. Every guffaw of which we were guilty would be used against us. What had happened to the impeccable tradition of reticence and right thinking that men of known probity should yield with this publicity to the blandishments of a queen of the sawdust?

It was a desperately unlucky position; but we were committed to it irrevocably. Nothing now could save

our good name among our neighbours. Yet that half hour after midnight was crowded and glorious. Who were we, weak-willed mediocrities, that we should resist the moment? After the passes we had braved in the service of one so splendid and so ill-starred, after the long-drawn suspense we had endured, could we be insensible to the gay music, half-affectionate, half-insolent, of our names upon her lips?

Coverdale sat by the right of the sorceress, I by the left—responsible men—yet even with the Gorgon's eye of the Great Lady upon us, we were fain to publish to the world that we were neither less nor more than the bond-slaves of the circus rider from Vienna.

CHAPTER XV

AN INTERNATIONAL ISSUE

By a merciful dispensation, the ducal party withdrew at twenty-five minutes past twelve, doubtless to avert the ignominy of compulsion at the half-hour. By that means we were at least spared any further ordeal that might be forthcoming from that quarter. And yet would it have been an ordeal? That conflict which a little while ago had seemed so demoralising to the overwrought nerves, was now only too likely to be hailed as the sublimity of battle.

We were loth to obey the inexorable decree of the Licensing Act, but there was no choice. Happily the five minutes' start enjoyed by our friends and neighbours, gave us a clear field; and without further misadventure, "The Stormy Petrel" was escorted to her chariot. She drove off with Fitz to her hotel, while the rest of us, in no humour for repose, yielded to the suggestion of Alexander O'Mulligan, "that we should toddle round to Jermyn Street and draw him for a drink."

It had begun to freeze. Although the pavements were like glass, overhead the stars were wonderful. The shrewd air was like a balm for the fumes of the wine and the spirit of lawlessness that had aroused us

to a pitch of exaltation that was almost dangerous. We decided to walk, if only to lessen the tension upon our nerves. The three junior members of the conspiracy walked ahead, a little roisterous of aspect, arm in arm, uncertain of gait—to be sure the condition of the streets afforded every excuse—and their hats askew. At a respectful distance and in a fashion more decorous they were followed by the Chief Constable and myself.

"And now, Coverdale," said I, "have the goodness to explain what you meant when you told me not to ask what happened to the Ambassador?"

I received no answer.

"My dear fellow," I urged, "I think I am entitled to know."

"You ought to be able to guess!"

"I don't understand; Fitz is certainly safe and sound. How did you manage to bring them to reason?"

"They were not brought to reason."

The grim tone alarmed me.

"What do you mean?"

I stopped under a street lamp to look into the face of my companion.

"I simply mean this," said he. "The madman shot him dead!"

Involuntarily I reeled against the lamp post.

"You can't mean that," I said feebly.

"If only we could deceive ourselves!" said Coverdale, in a hoarse tone. "All the time I sat at supper with that—that woman I was trying to persuade myself that the thing had not happened. The whole business ought to be a fantastic dream, but, my God, it isn't!"

"Well, it was his life or Fitz's, I suppose?"

"Yes, there can be no question about that. The Embassy people admit it. And there is this to be said for those fellows; they know how to play the game."

"A pretty low down game anyhow. If they steal a man's wife, they must take the consequences."

"I agree; but the circumstances were exceptional. And give those fellows their due, as soon as we came to the ballroom they played the game right up."

"What will happen?"

"No one can say; but they can be trusted to give nothing away."

"But surely the whole thing must come out?"

"Quite possibly; but one prefers to hope that it may not. It is a very ugly affair, involving international issues; but the First Secretary—I forget his name—appeared to take a very matter of fact and commonsense view of it. After all, Fitzwaren has merely vindicated his rights."

Dismally enough we followed in the wake of the others. All day we had been hovering between tragedy and farce, never quite knowing what would be the outcome of the extravaganza in which we were bearing a part. But now we had the answer with no uncertainty.

"All along, some such sequel as this was to be feared," said I, "and yet I fail to see that any real blame attaches to us."

"Do you! If you ask my opinion, we have all been guilty of unpardonable folly in backing this fellow, Fitzwaren. Really, I can't think what we have been about. Before the last has been heard of this business,

it strikes me that there will be the devil to pay all round."

In my heart I felt only too clearly that this was the truth.

At O'Mulligan's rooms we drank out of long glasses and were accorded the privilege of inspecting his "pots." The trophies of the amateur middle weight champion of Great Britain, who claimed Dublin as his natal city, made an extremely brave array. But neither they nor the refreshment that was offered to us were able to dispel the gloom that had descended upon one and all.

"There is one thing to be said for this chap, Fitzwaren," said Alexander O'Mulligan, in a tone that was not devoid of reverence. "He is grit all through!"

Truth there might be in this reflection, but there was little consolation. Sadly we bade adieu to Alexander O'Mulligan and went to our hotel to bed, yet not to sleep. For myself, I can answer that throughout the night I had dark forebodings and distorted images for my bedfellows; and it was not until it was almost time to rise that I was at last able to snatch a brief doze.

It was fair to assume that the slumbers of the others had been equally precarious, for at ten o'clock I found myself to be the first of our party at the breakfast table. In a few minutes I was joined by Coverdale, who carried the morning paper in his hand.

He directed my attention to the obituary notice of H. E. the Illyrian Ambassador who, it appeared, had met his death at the Illyrian Embassy in Portland Place, at 11.30 o'clock the previous evening, in pecu-

liarly tragic and distressing circumstances. It appeared that his Excellency, a noted shot who took a keen interest in firearms of every description, was engaged in demonstrating to various members of the Embassy certain merits in the mechanism of a new type of revolver, of which his Excellency claimed to be the inventor, when the weapon went off, killing the unfortunate nobleman instantly. The brief statement of the tragic event was followed by a eulogium, in which the dead Ambassador's martial, political and social attainments, and the irreparable loss, not only to his sovereign, but to the polity of nations, was dealt with at length.

"Those fellows have done well," said Coverdale. "But I should be glad to think that the last has been heard of this."

This conviction I shared with the Chief Constable, but it was good to find that thus far Illyrian diplomacy had proved equal to the occasion. It had the effect of giving me a better appetite for breakfast, and in consequence I ordered two boiled eggs instead of one.

There was one other item of sinister interest to be found among the morning's news. In glancing over it my attention was drawn to the brief account of a mysterious tragedy which had been enacted in Hyde Park near the Broad Walk the previous evening between six and seven o'clock. A man, who according to papers found in his possession, bore the name of Ludovic Bolland, of Illyrian extraction, had been found dead with a bullet wound in the brain. It was not clear whether it was a case of murder or suicide. The police inclined

to the former opinion, but at present were not in possession of any information capable of throwing light upon the subject.

I did not reveal to Coverdale the fell suspicion that I could not keep out of my thoughts. The incident of the taxi following us, the foreign-looking man who had entered the hotel, and Fitz's words and subsequent conduct, all conspired to form a theory that I was very loth to entertain and yet from which I was unable to escape. It certainly had the effect of making me profoundly uncomfortable and caused the second egg I had ordered to be superfluous after all.

Beyond all things now I longed to return to my country home without delay. The past twenty-four hours formed a page in my existence which, if impossible to erase, I earnestly desired to forget.

CHAPTER XVI

HORSE AND HOUND

In spite of the fact that Fitz had accepted Alexander O'Mulligan's invitation to witness "Burns's do with the 'Gunner' " at the National Sporting Club that evening, he retrieved his motor from the garage in Regent Street, wherein Illyrian diplomacy had placed it, and immediately after luncheon set out for the country with that other item of his recovered property. He was accompanied by Coverdale. The Chief Constable seemed to feel that the peace of our county could not endure if he spent another night in the metropolis. He was certainly able to return in the simple consciousness of having done his duty. Like a man and a brother he had stood by a fellow Englishman in the hour of his need.

To one of primitive rural instincts, such as myself, London under even the most favourable conditions is apt to pall. During the reaction which followed the excitements of the previous night it filled me with loathing. But I owed it to an ingrained love of veracity that I should drive to Bolton Street to offer consolation to my grandmother in the hour of her affliction. She is a charming old lady, and she knows the world. She was unaffectedly glad to see me and immediately ordered

a fire to be lit in the guest-chamber, although "she really didn't know that I was in need of money." My explanation that it was spontaneous natural affection which had led me to seek first-hand information on the perennial subject of her bronchitis, merely provoked a display of the engaging scepticism that seems to flourish in the hearts of old ladies of considerable private means.

At the first moment consistent with honour, to be precise, on the following Monday at noon, I found myself on No. 2 platform at the Grand Central. The guilt of my conscience was agreeably countered by the thrill of relief in my heart. I was going back to the Madam and Miss Lucinda. Less than three days ago long odds had been laid by an overwrought fancy that I should never see them again. Howbeit, the fates in their boundless leniency, had ordained that I should return to tell the tale.

Yet if I must confess the truth, such havoc had been worked with the delicately-hung nervous system of "a married man, a father of a family and a county member" that it would not have surprised me in the least, even now I had taken my ticket for Middleham, to find the hand of a well dressed detective laid on my shoulder, or to find a revolver next my temple at the instance of some sombre alien. Still these fears were hardly worthy of the broad light of day or of the distinction of my escort. Not only was my relation by marriage returning with me, but he had prevailed upon the amateur middle weight champion of Great Britain to accept Brasset's cordial invitation that he should satisfy himself that the gentle art of chasing the fox was quite as

well understood by the Crackanthorpe Hounds as by the Galway Blazers.

In the presence of Alexander O'Mulligan's epic breadth of manner it was impossible for a man to take pessimistic views of his destiny. If I had a suspicion of the skill of a Dickens or a Thackeray I should try to give that "touch of the brogue" which flavoured the conversation of this paladin like a subtle condiment. Attached to our express in a loose box, in the care of a native of Kerry, was "an accomplished lepper" up to fifteen stone, not merely the envy of the Blazers, but of every man, woman, and child in the kingdom of Ireland. If his price was not three hundred of the yellow boys, his owner cordially invited anybody—*anybody* to contradict him violently.

Next to Alexander O'Mulligan's horse and his breadth of manner, his clothes call for mention. Their cut and style must be pronounced as "sporting." In particular his waistcoat was a thing of beauty. It was a canary of the purest dye, forming a really piquant, indeed æsthetic, contrast to the delicate tint of green in his eye. The presence in that organ of that genial hue is thought by some to invite the presumption of the worldly; but according to Joseph Jocelyn De Vere Vane-Anstruther, whose humble devotion to his hero was almost pathetic, it called for a very stout fellow indeed "to try it on" with the amateur middle weight champion of Great Britain.

Nevertheless, like every paladin of the great breed, Alexander O'Mulligan was as gentle as he was brave. He had hardly set foot in Dympsfield House, which

he did somewhere about tea-time on the day of his arrival in our parish, before he captured the heart of Miss Lucinda. He straightway assumed the rôle of a bear with the most realistic and thrilling completeness. Not only was his growl like distant thunder in the mountains, but also he had the faculty of rolling his eyes in a savage frenzy, and over and above everything else, a tendency to bite your legs upon little or no provocation. It was not until he had promised to marry her that she could be induced to part with him.

The ruler of Dympsfield House returned from Doughty Bridge, Yorks., equally felicitous in her health and in her temper. We dined agreeably *tête-à-tête* with the aid of Heidsieck cuvée 1889. I reported that the venerable inhabitant of Bolton Street, Mayfair, was supporting her affliction with her accustomed grace and resignation; and duly received the benediction of my parents-in-law, who in the opinion of their youngest daughter had never been in more vigorous health, which is no more than one expects to hear of those who dedicate their lives to virtue.

I was in the act of paring an apple when Mrs. Arbuthnot said with an air of detachment that was Vane-Anstruther of very good quality: "By the way, has anything been heard of that creature?"

"Creature, my angel?" said I. If my tone conveyed anything it was that the world contained only one creature, and she at that moment was balancing a piece of preserved ginger on her fruit knife.

"The circus woman."

"Circus woman?" said I blandly. Our glasses were

half empty and I filled them up. "Somehow," said I, "this stuff does not seem equal to the Bollinger that your father sends us at Christmas." Strictly speaking this was not altogether the case, but then truth has many aspects as the pagan philosophers have found occasion to observe.

"Mrs. Fitz, you goose!"

"She has come home, I believe," said I, with a casual air, which all the same belonged to the region of finished diplomacy.

"Come home!" The fount of my felicity indulged in a glower that can only be described as truculent, but her flutelike tones had a little piping thrill that softened its effect considerably. "Come home! Do you mean to say that Fitz has taken her back again?"

"There is reason to believe he has done so."

"What amazing creatures men are!"

"Yes, *mon enfant*, we have the authority of Haeckel, that matter assumed a very remarkable guise when man evolved himself out of mud and water."

"Don't be trivial, Odo. To think she has dared to come home. If I were a man and my wife bolted with the chauffeur, I wonder if she would dare to come home again?"

"The hypothesis is unthinkable. Freedom and poetry and romance, translated into that overtaxed, downtrodden bondslave, the registered and betrousered parliamentary voter!"

The next morning the Crackanthorpe met at the Marl Pits. All the world and his wife were there. The lawless mobs which are the curse of latter day fox-

hunting, are not quite so rampant in our country as they are in that of more than one of our neighbours. Why this merciful dispensation has been granted to us no man can explain. It may be that we have not a sufficient care for the "bubble reputation." But as our revered Vicar says, our immunity is one further proof if such were needed, that the Providence which watches over the lowliest of God's creatures is essentially beneficent; certainly a very becoming frame of mind for a humble-minded vicar in Christ who keeps ten horses in his stables and hunts six days a week.

Brasset in a velvet cap winding the horn of his fathers, is a figure for respect. Even the Nimrods of the old school who feel that his courtesy and his care for the feelings of others are beneath the dignity of the chase, accord to his office a recognition which they would be the last to grant to his merely human qualities. This morning the noble Master was esquired by his distinguished guest. The O'Mulligan of Castle Mulligan, pride of The Blazers, possessor of the straightest left in the western hemisphere, was immediately presented to the mistress of Dympsfield House.

That lady, mounted so expensively that her weakling of a husband was deservedly condemned to bestride a quadruped that Joseph Jocelyn De Vere Vane-Anstruther publicly stigmatised as "an insult to the 'unt," was instantly prepossessed, as her daughter had been, in favour of the amateur middle weight champion. Certainly his blandishments were many. Grinning from ear to ear, revealing two regular and gleaming rows of white teeth, his bearing had both grace and cor-

diality. His smile in itself was enough to take the bone out of the ground, and he had all the charming volubility of his nation. As for his aide-de-camp, he too deserves mention. Having done very well at "snooker" the previous day, my relation by marriage was looking very pleasant and happy in the most perfectly fitting coat that ever embellished the human form. He was mounted on Hamlet, Prince of Denmark, the *piéce de resistance* of his stable.

We were accepting the hospitality of the Reverend, an agreeable function that was rendered necessary by the fact that his parsonage is within a mile of the tryst, when portentous toot-toots accompanied by prodigious gruntings assailed our ears.

"I say, Jo," said Alexander O'Mulligan in an aside to his admiring camp-follower, "here comes ould Fizza-magig."

This elegant pseudonym veiled the identity of the most august of her sex. The famous fur coat and the bell-shaped topper converged upon the Rectory gravel, at the instance of a worn-out dust distributor whose manifold grunts and wheezes all too clearly proclaimed that it belonged to an early phase of the industry.

It was the broad light of day, I was in the midst of friends and brother sportsmen, but once again the chill of apprehension went down my spine. For an instant I had a vision of pink satin. Mrs. Catesby accepted the glass of brown sherry and the piece of cake respectfully proffered by the Church. But while she discoursed of parochial commonplaces in that penetrating voice of hers, it was plain that her august head was occupied

with affairs of state. Her grave grey eye travelled to the middle of the lawn where the noble Master was sharing a ham sandwich with Halcyon and Harmony; thence to the inadequately-mounted Member for the Uppingdon Division of Middleshire; thence to the Magnificent Youth and the heroic O'Mulligan. Finally in contemplative austerity it rested upon the trim outline of the lady whose habit had not a fault, although there is reason to believe that in the eyes of one it erred a little on the side of fashion, who with the aid of Parsoness and Laura Glendinning, was engaged in putting the scheme of things in its appointed order.

Once again I was undergoing the process of feeling profoundly uncomfortable when we were regaled with an incident so pregnant with drama, that a mere private emotion was swept away. An imperious vision in a scarlet coat, mounted on a noble and generous horse, came in at the Parson's gate. She was accompanied by the son-in-law of Ferdinand the Twelfth.

"What ho, the military!" murmured Alexander O'Mulligan.

To the sheer amazement of all, save three of his followers, the Master of the Crackanthorpe was the first to greet Mrs. Fitz. A recent incident was fresh in the minds of all. It was pretty well understood that "the circus rider from Vienna" and her cavalier entered the Rectory grounds without an invitation, for the Fitzwaren stock stood lower than ever in the market. It was expected of our battered and traduced chieftain that at least he should withhold official recognition from these lawless invaders. He was expected to vindicate

his office and maintain what was left of his dignity by looking assiduously in another direction. But he did nothing of the sort.

In the most heedless and tactless manner the noble Master proceeded to forfeit the sympathy, the esteem, and the confidence of those who had hitherto dispensed those commodities so lavishly. It would be hard to conceive a more grievous affront to the feminine followers of the Crackanthorpe than was furnished by the Master's personal reception of the lady in the scarlet coat. The grave yet cordial humility of his bearing, admirably Christian in the light of too-recent history, received no interpretation in the terms of the higher altruism.

"He will have to resign," breathed the august Mrs. Catesby in the ear of the outraged Laura Glendinning.

It was a relief to everybody when a move was made to the top cover. Without loss of time the question of questions was put. Was the famous ticked fox at home? Was that almost mythical customer, whose legend was revered in three countries, in his favourite earth?

In a half circle, each thinking his thoughts, and with a furtive eye for his neighbour, we waited.

A succession of silvery notes from the pack at last proclaimed the answer to the question. As usual the father of cunning had set his mask for Langley Dumbles. One of the stiffest bits of country in the Shires lay stretched out ahead. Two distinct and well-defined courses were immediately presented to the field. The one was pregnant with grief yet fragrant with

glory. The other, if not the path of honour, was certainly more appropriate to the married man, the father of the family and the county member, particularly if the wife of the member has a weakness for three hundred guinea hunters. There was also a middle course for those who while retaining some semblance of ambition have learned to temper it with prudence, observation and sagacity. It was to the middle course that nature had condemned old Dobbin Grey and his rider.

Not for us the intemperate delights of the thruster. Crash through a bullfinch went Alexander O'Mulligan, the pride of The Blazers. Almost in his pocket followed the lady in the scarlet coat. Almost in hers followed Mrs. Arbuthnot. Laura Glendinning and little Mrs. Josiah P. Perkins were obviously hardening their hearts for prodigious deeds of gallantry. It was already clear as the sun at noon that if our old and sportsmanlike friend, whose jacket had the curious ticking, only kept to the line it generally pleased him to follow, some very jealous riding was about to be witnessed among the feminine followers of the Crackanthorpe Hounds.

"My God, they call this 'untin'!" said Joseph Jocelyn De Vere Vane-Anstruther, who, to his disgust, had allowed himself, in the preliminary scuffle for places, to be nonplussed by the unparalleled ardour of these Amazons.

One thing was obvious. Old Dobbin Grey and his rider were a little too near the centre of the picture. Let us blush to relate it, but at the obsequious prompt-

ings of memory we moved down the hedgerow of that wide and heavy pasture, yea, even unto its uttermost left hand corner where a gate was known to lurk. But alas! Nemesis lurked also in that corner of the landscape. For we were doomed to discover that the eternal standby of the lover of the middle course, nay, the indubitable emblem of it, the goodly handgate, had been removed of malice prepense, and in lieu thereof was a stiff and upstanding post and rails, freshly planted and painted newly!

It was a great shock to the old horse. It was also a crisis in the life of his rider. The rails looked terribly high and stout; we had lost so much time already that every second was priceless if we were to see hounds again. It was hard on the old horse, yet it really seemed that there was only one thing to be done. However, before resolve could be translated into action, other lovers of the middle course bore down upon us; no less a pair than Mrs. Catesby mounted upon Marian.

"It was my intention not to speak to you again, Odo Arbuthnot," said the august rider of Marian, "but if you will give us a lead over that post and rails we will follow."

"*Place aux dames*," said I with ingrained gallantry. "Besides you are quite as competent to break that top rail as we are."

"Out-hunting," said the high-minded votary of Diana, "you must behave like a gentleman, even if at the Savoy——"

With due encouragement the old horse really did very well indeed, hitting the top rail fore and aft it is true,

describing in his descent a geometrical figure not unlike a parabola, but landing on his legs and gathering himself up quite respectably in the adjoining fifty acres of ridge and furrow. With a little pardonable condescension, I turned round to look how Marian would behave with her resolute-minded mistress. It is no disparagement to the Dobbin to say that Mrs. Catesby's chestnut is a cleverer beast than he ever was, also she has youth on her side, and she is taller by a hand. She grazed the rail with her hind legs, but her performance was quite good enough to be going on with.

Mrs. Catesby can ride as straight as anybody, but now she is "A Mother of Seven" who writes to *The Times* upon the subject of educational reform, and she has taken to sitting upon committees—in more senses than one—she feels that she owes it to the mothers of the nation that she should set them an example in the matter of paying due respect to their vertebrae. The negotiation of the post and rails had put us on excellent terms with ourselves, if not with each other, and side by side we made short work of the fifty acres of ridge and furrow; popped through a sequence of handgates and along a succession of lanes; and made such a liberal use of the craft that we had painfully acquired in the course of more seasons than we cared to remember, that in the end it was only by the mercy of Allah that we did not head the fox!

The fortune of war had placed us in the first flight, but the celebrated customer was still going so strong that we should have to show cause if we were going to remain there.

The noble Master was looking very anxious. Well he might, for between him and his hounds was the lady in the scarlet coat. Mounted upon the most magnificent-looking bay horse I have ever seen she seemed fully prepared to hunt the pack. And I grieve to relate that following hard upon her line, and as close as equine flesh and blood could contrive it, was Mrs. Arbuthnot on her three hundred guinea hunter.

"Look at Mops," quoth a disgusted voice. "Clean off her rocker. Hope to God there won't be a check, that's all!"

Jodey soared by us, taking a fence in his stride.

On the contrary, old Dobbin Grey was beginning devoutly to hope that a check there would be. But as game as a pebble, the old warrior struggled on. It would never do for him to be cut out by Marian, and in that opinion his rider concurred. Luckily we found an easy place in the fence, but all too soon a more formidable obstacle presented itself. It was Langley Brook. Very bold jumping would be called for to save a wet jacket; and it is an open secret that even in his prime, the Dobbin has always held that the only possible place for water is in a stable bucket.

We decided to go round by the bridge. A perfectly legitimate resolution, I am free to maintain, for ardent followers of the middle course. Having arrived at this statesmanlike decision there was time to look ahead. It was not without trepidation that we did so. In front was a welter of ambitious first flighters. Yet, as always, the one to catch the eye was the lady in the scarlet coat. Utterly heedless, she went at the Brook at its

widest, the noble bay rose like a Centaur and landed in safety. Sticking ever to her, closer than a sister, was Mrs. Arbuthnot. I shuddered and had a vision of a broken back for the three hundred guinea hunter, and a ducking for its rider. Happily, if you are a member of the clan Vane-Anstruther, the more critical the moment the cooler you are apt to be; also you are born with the priceless faculty of sitting still and keeping down your hands. The three hundred guinea hunter floundered on to the opposite bank, threatened to fall back into the stream, by a Herculean effort recovered itself and emerged on terra firma.

It was with a heart devout with gratitude that I turned to the bridge. To my surprise, for as all my attention had been for the Brook I had had none to spare for the field as a whole, I found myself cheek by jowl with Jodey. In the hunting field I know no young man whom nature has endowed so happily. His air of world-weariness is a cloak for a justness of perception, which apparently without the expenditure of the least exertion generally lands him there or thereabouts at the finish.

"The silly blighters!—don't they see they have lost their fox?"

This piece of criticism was hurled not merely at the Amazons, who had already negotiated the water, but also at the noble Master and his attendant satellites who were in the act of following their example.

"Reggie is quite right for once," said a voice from the near side, severe and magisterial in quality. "It is his duty to prevent, if he can, his hounds being over-

ridden by those unspeakable women. If Irene belonged to me I should send her straight home to bed."

"Ought to be smacked," said the sportsman on the off side, cordially. "Anybody'd think she'd had no upbringin'!"

Feeling in a sense responsible for the misbehaviour of my lawful property, I "lay low and said nuffin." Indeed, there was precious little to be said in defence of such conduct in the presence of the whole field.

On the strength of Jodey's pronouncement we crossed the bridge at our leisure. As usual his wisdom hastened to justify itself. Reynard was tucked snugly under a haystack, doubtless with his pad to his nose. He was upon sacred earth, where, after a tremendous turnup with Peter, the Crackanthorpe terrier, the Crackanthorpe hounds, and the Crackanthorpe huntsman reluctantly left him.

A halt was called; flasks and sandwiches were produced; and the honourable company of the less enterprising, or the less fortunate, began to assemble in force without the precincts of the Manor Farm stackyard. Conversation grew rife; and at least one fragment that penetrated to my ears was pungent.

"Look here, Mops," was its context, "when do you suppose you are goin' to give over playing the goat?"

The rider of the three hundred guinea hunter was splashed with mud up to her green collar, her hair was coming down, her hat was anyhow, her cheeks were flame colour, and the sides of Malvolio were sobbing.

"*Mon enfant*," I ventured sadly to observe, "it may

be magnificent, but it is not the art of chasing the fox, even as it is practised in the flying countries."

The light of battle flamed in the eyes of the star of my destiny.

"What nonsense you talk, Odo! Do you think that the circus woman——"

"Sssh! She will hear you."

"Hope she will!"

"Fact is, Mops," said her admonisher in chief, "as I've always said you are only fit for a *provincial* pack."

Having thus delivered himself Mrs. Arbuthnot's brother washed his hands of this "hard case" in the completest and most effectual manner. He turned about and bestowed his best bow upon the circus rider from Vienna. The act was certainly irrational. The behaviour of the lady in the scarlet coat was quite as much exposed to censure. To be sure her nationality was to be urged in her defence, but then, as the sorely tried Master confided to me in a pathetic aside, "she had been out quite often enough to learn the rules of the game."

"You can't expect Crown Princesses, my dear fellow, to trouble about rules," said I. "They make their own."

"Then I wish they would hunt hounds of their own and leave mine to me," said the long-suffering one tragically. "It turns me dizzy every time I see her among 'em. If Fitz had any sense of decency he would look after her."

"Fitz is the slave of circumstance. Brasset, if you are a wise fellow and you are not above taking the

advice of a friend, you will never marry the next in succession to an old established and despotic monarchy."

"My God—no!" The voice of the noble Master vibrated with profound emotion.

In honour of this resolution we exchanged flasks.

CHAPTER XVII

A GLARE IN THE SKY

The Society for the Maintenance of the Public Decency has a record of long and distinguished usefulness, but never in its annals has it been moved to a more determined activity than during the week which followed this ill-starred run. The Ruling Dames or Past Grand Mistresses—I don't quite know what their true official title is—of this august body met and conferred and drank tea continually. Those who were conversant with the Society's methods made dire prophecy of a public action of an unparalleled rigour. But beyond the fact that Mrs. Arbuthnot's china-blue eyes had an inscrutable glint, and that Mrs. Catesby's Minerva-like front was as lofty and menacing as became the daughter of Jove, nothing happened during this critical period which really aspires to the dignity of history.

Three times within that fateful space the noble Master led forth his hounds; three times was it whispered confidently in my ear by my little friend Mrs. Josiah P. Perkins, with a piquant suggestion in her accent of her old Kentucky home, which sometimes overtakes her very charmingly in moments of acute emotion, "that if the tenderfoot from the rotunda hit the trail, Redge

would take the fox-dogs home;"* three times did the lady in the scarlet coat do her best to override the fox-dogs in question; three times, as the veracious historian is fain to confess, nothing happened whatever. It is true that more than once the noble Master looked at the offender "as no gentleman ought to look at a lady." More than once he cursed her by all his gods, but never within her hearing. Rumour had it that he also told Fitz that if he didn't look after his wife he should give the order for the kennels. Unfortunately, Miss Laura Glendinning was the sole authority for this melodramatic statement.

However, on the evening of the seventh day the stars in their courses said their word in the matter. Doubtless the behaviour of the astral bodies was the outcome of a formally expressed wish of the Society; at least it is well known that certain of its members carry weight in heaven. Whether Mrs. Catesby and the Vicar's wife headed a deputation to Jupiter I am not in a position to affirm. Be that as it may, on the evening of the seventh day fate issued a decree against "the circus rider from Vienna" and all her household.

Let this fell occurrence be recorded with detail. Myself and co-partner in life's felicities had had a tolerable if somewhat fatiguing day with the Crackanthorpe Hounds. We had assisted at the destruction of a couple of fur-coated members of society who had done us no harm whatever; and having exchanged the

*In the opinion of Mrs. Josiah P. Perkins this passage fully guarantees the author's total ignorance of a very great proposition.

soaked, muddy, and generally uncomfortable habiliments of the chase for the garb of peace, had fared *tête-à-tête*—Joseph Jocelyn De Vere Vane-Anstruther regaling his friends at the Hall with the light of his countenance and his post-prandial skill at snooker—with sumptuous decency upon bakèd meats and the good red wine.

We were in the most harmonious stage of all that this chequered existence has to offer; taking our ease in our inn while our nether limbs, whose stiffness was a not unpleasing reminiscence of the strenuous day we had spent in the saddle, toasted luxuriously before a good sea-coal fire; smoking the pipe of peace together, although this is by way of being a figure of speech, since Mrs. Arbuthnot affected a mild Turkish cigarette; comparing notes of our joint adventures by flood and field, with the natural and inevitable De Vere Vane-Anstruther note of condescension quite agreeably mitigated by one tiny liqueur glass of the 1820 brandy—a magic potion which ere now has caused the Magnificent Youth himself to abate a few feathers of his plumage. We were conducting an exhaustive inquiry into the respective merits of Pixie and Daydream, and I had been led with a charm that was irresistible into a concurrence with the sharer of my bliss that both were worth every penny of the price that had been paid for them, although I had not so much as thrown a leg over either of these quadrupeds of most distinguished ancestry.

"It *is* rather a lot to pay, but you can't call them dear, can you, because they *do* fetch such prices now-

adays, don't they? And Laura is perfectly green with envy."

"I'm glad of that," said I with undefeated optimism. "If her greenness approximates to the right shade it will match the Hunt collar. How green is she?"

"Funny old thing!" Mrs. Arbuthnot's beam was of childlike benignity. "She is not such a bad sort, really. Besides, plain people are always the nicest, aren't they, poor dears? Yes, Parkins, what is it?"

Parkins the peerless had entered the drawing-room after a discreet preliminary knock for which the circumstances really made no demand whatever. He had sidled up to his mistress, and in his mien natural reserve and a desire to dispense information were finely mingled.

"Beg pardon, ma'am, but have you seen the glare in the sky?"

"What sort of a glare, Parkins?" A lazy voice emerged from the seventh heaven of the hedonist. "Do you mean it's a what-do-you-call-it? A *planet* I suppose you mean, Parkins?"

"It can hardly be a *comet*, ma'am," said Parkins with his most encyclopædic air. "It is so bright and so fixed, and it seems to be getting larger."

"So long as it isn't the end of the world," said Mrs. Arbuthnot, fondling her gold cigarette-case with a little sigh.

"It looks to me like the Castle, ma'am. It is over in that direction. I remember when the west wing was burnt twelve years ago."

"You think the Castle is on fire?" said I.

I also was in the seventh heaven of the hedonist. But

gathering my faculties as resolutely as I could, I rose from the good sea-coal fire and assisted Parkins to pull aside the curtains.

"By Jove, you're right. There is a blaze somewhere. But isn't it rather near for the Castle?"

"It might be the Grange," said Parkins.

I was fain to agree that the Grange it might be. Somehow that seemed a place excellently laid for disaster. The announcement that the Grange was on fire brought Mrs. Arbuthnot to the window. Born under Mars, the star of my destiny is nothing if not a woman of action. In spite of her present rather lymphatic state she ordered the car around immediately. Within five minutes we were braving a dark and stormy December night.

The beacon growing ever brighter as we went, it did not take long to convince us that the Grange would be our destination. It is to be feared that we broke the law, for in something considerably under half-an-hour we had come to the home of the Fitzwarens.

A heartrending scene it was. The beautiful but always rather desolate old house, which dates from John o' Gaunt, seemed already doomed. A portion of it was even now in ruins and on all sides the flames were leaping up fiercely to the sky. Engines had not yet had time to come from Middleham, and the progress of the fire was appalling.

A number of servants and villagers had devoted themselves to the task of retrieving the furniture. On a lawn at some distance from the house an incongruous collection of articles had been laid out: a picture by

Rubens side by side with a trouser-press; a piece of Sèvres cheek by jowl with a kitchen saucepan. Standing in their midst in the charge of a nurse was the small elf of four. Her eyes were sparkling and she was dancing and clapping her hands in delight at the spectacle. The nurse was in tears.

Mrs. Arbuthnot had not seen the creature before. But her instincts are swift and they are sure.

"Come with me," she said to the nurse. "Saunders will take you in the car to Dympsfield House. They will make up a bed for you in the day nursery and see that you get some warm food."

Hardly had the little girl suffered herself to be led away by the prospect of a new adventure before two men came towards the spot where I stood. They were grimy and dishevelled, and the upper part of their persons seemed to be enveloped in folds of wet blanket. They were staggering under a very large and unwieldy burden which was swathed in a material similar to that which they wore themselves.

With much care this object was deposited upon a Sheraton table, and then I found myself greeted by a familiar voice.

"Hullo, Arbuthnot! Didn't expect to see you here. Very good of you to come."

It was the voice of Fitz speaking with the almost uncanny *insouciance* of the wonderful night at Portland Place. He cast off the curious wrappings which encumbered his head, and said to his companion, who was in similar guise, "I'm afraid it has us beat. The sooner we get out of this kit the better."

There came an incoherent growl out of the folds of wet blanket.

"Why, Coverdale!" I said in astonishment.

"I think we ought to make a sporting dash for that Holbein," said the growl, becoming coherent. "That is, if you are quite sure it isn't a forgery."

"Personally I think it is," said Fitz, in his voice of unnatural calm. "But my father always believed it to be genuine."

"Better take the word of your father. Let us get at it."

It was the work of a moment to strip the wrappings of the retrieved masterpiece upon the Sheraton table.

"Can I help?" said I.

"If you want to be of use," said Fitz, "go and give the Missus a hand with the horses."

Leaving Fitz and Coverdale to make yet another entry into what seemed hardly less than a furnace of living fire, I made my way round to the stables. To approach them one had to be careful. The heat was intense; sparks and burning fragments were being flung a considerable distance by the gusts of wind, and masonry was crashing continually. The out-buildings had not yet caught, but with the wind in its present quarter it would only be the work of a few moments before they did so.

My recollection is of plunging, rearing and frightened animals, and of a commanding, all-pervading presence in their midst. Amid the throng of stable-hands, villagers, firemen and policemen who had now come upon the scene, it rose supreme, directing their energies and

sustaining them with that imperious magnetism which she possessed beyond any creature I have ever seen. I heard it said afterwards that she alone had the power to induce the twelve horses to quit their loose boxes; that one by one she led them out, soothing and caressing them; and that so long as she was with them they shewed comparatively little fear of the roaring furnace that was so near to them, but that no sooner were they handed over to others than they became unmanageable.

Certainly it was due to a consummate exhibition of her power that the horses were got out of their stalls without harm to themselves or to others. They were confided to the care of the friendly farmers of the neighbourhood, who, assembled in force, were working heroically to combat the flames. All night long the work of salvage went on, but in spite of all that could be done, even with the aid of numerous fire-engines from Middleham, nothing could save the old house. It burnt like tinder. By three o'clock that December morning it was a smouldering ruin.

At intervals during the night some of the Grange servants had been dispatched to Dympsfield House, with as many of the personal belongings of their master and mistress as they could collect. Our establishment is a modest one, but not for a moment did it occur to Mrs. Arbuthnot that it would be unable to offer sanctuary to those who needed it so sorely.

The fire had run its course and all were resigned to the inevitable when Mrs. Arbuthnot, without deigning to consult the nominal head of our household, made the offer of our hospitality to Fitz and his wife. At her

own request she had previously foregone an introduction to "the circus rider from Vienna"; and now in these tragic December small hours she deemed such a formality to be unnecessary. Verily misfortune makes strange bedfellows!

If I must tell the truth, it surprised me to learn that the Fitzwarens had been prevailed upon to accept the hospitality of Dympsfield House. True, they were homeless; but, looking at the case impartially, it seemed to me that they had not been very generously treated by their neighbours. The foibles of "the circus rider from Vienna" had aroused a measure of covert hostility to which the most obtuse people could not have been insensible. Had the average ordinary married couple been in the case of Fitz and his wife, I do not think they would have yielded to Mrs. Arbuthnot's generosity.

The Fitzwarens, however, were far from being ordinary average people. Therefore, by a quarter to five that morning they had crossed our threshold; and as some recompense for the privations of that tragic night they were promptly regaled with a scratch meal of coffee and sandwiches.

One other individual, at his own suggestion, accompanied our guests to Dympsfield House. He was of a sinister omen, being no less a person than the Chief Constable of our county. His presence at the fire had been a matter for surprise. And when, as we were about to quit the unhappy scene, he came to me privately and said that if we could squeeze a corner for him in the car he should be glad to come with us, that surprise was not made less.

CHAPTER XVIII

MRS. ARBUTHNOT BEGINS TO TAKE NOTICE

It was a little before six when the ladies retired in the quest of their lost repose. No sooner had they left us than we lit our pipes and drew our chairs up to the fire. In patience I awaited the riddle of the Chief Constable's presence being read to me.

"Arbuthnot,"—the great man sucked at his pipe pensively—"there are several things that Fitzwaren and I are agreed that you ought to know."

Fitz nodded his head in curt but rather sinister approval.

"Yes, tell him," he said.

"Before Fitzwaren accepted your hospitality," said the great man, "he asked my advice."

"Oh, really?" said I.

"And I think it only right to mention"—the air of the great man reminded me of my old tutor expounding a proposition in Euclid—"that it is upon my advice he has accepted it."

"I ought to feel honoured."

"Well, yes, perhaps you ought." The Chief Constable removed his pipe from his lips and tapped it upon an extremely dirty boot. "But whether you will feel

honoured when you have heard all we have to say to you I am not so sure."

"Nor I," said Fitz.

"You see, Arbuthnot, we have a rather delicate problem to deal with. It is neither more nor less than the personal safety of the Princess."

"I hope," said I, "her Royal Highness will be at least as safe here as she would be anywhere else."

"That is the crux of the whole matter. Fitzwaren and I have come to the conclusion that, for the time being, the Princess will actually be safer in this house than she would be in any other."

"Really!"

"Our local police, acting in conjunction with Scotland Yard, hope to be able to ensure her safety, that is if she and her friends take reasonable care."

"You may depend upon it, Coverdale, that as far as my wife and I are concerned we shall do nothing to jeopardise it."

"That is taken for granted. But her present position is much more critical that perhaps you are aware."

"I know, of course, that Ferdinand the Twelfth is determined to have her back in Illyria."

"Yes, and further than that, the Republican Party is equally determined that she never shall go back to Illyria. The events of last night have furnished another proof of their sentiments."

"I don't understand."

"There is reason to believe that the destruction of the Grange is the work of an incendiary. That is to say, a bomb was thrown through one of the windows,

as was the case at Blaenau recently. There can be no question that the object of the crime was to kill the Princess, as it was to kill the King, but in each case the business was bungled. In this instance, rather miraculously, not a soul was hurt, although the house, as you know, has been entirely destroyed. A bomb was thrown into the dining-room, but as dinner happened to be half-an-hour later than usual, nobody was there."

This grisly narrative gave me a sharp shock, I confess. And I must have betrayed my state of mind, for the Chief Constable favoured me with a smile of reassurance.

"Put your trust in the Middleshire police," said he, "with a little assistance from the Yard. They won't play that game twice with us, you can depend upon it. If the Yard had not been rather late with their information they would never have played it at all. Our people were actually on the way to the Grange when the outrage was committed."

For all the air of professional reassurance, the married man, the head of the family and the county member was thoroughly alarmed.

"It is all very well, Coverdale, but what guarantee is there that even at this moment they are not dropping bombs into our bedrooms?"

"Four men in plain clothes are patrolling your park, and will continue to do so as long as the Princess remains under your roof."

It would have been ungrateful not to express relief for this official vigilance. But that it was felt in any substantial measure is more than I can affirm.

"Of course, my dear fellow," said Fitz, "now that you are in possession of all the facts of the case, you have a perfect right to withdraw the offer of your hospitality. Coverdale and I are agreed that it will do much to promote my wife's safety for the time being, because this house will be kept under continual observation. But as soon as I can make other arrangements I shall do so, of course. And if you really believe that the safety of your house and family is involved, we shall have no alternative but to go at once."

To what length ought we to carry our altruism? Here was a grave problem for the married man, the father of the family and the county member. In spite of the opinion of the cool-headed and sagacious Coverdale, I could not allay the feeling that to harbour the "Stormy Petrel" was to incur a grave risk. But at the same time it was not in me to turn her adrift into the highways and hedges.

"Now that we have had due warning of what to expect," said Coverdale, "these gentry will not find it quite so easy to throw bombs in this country as they do in Illyria. And if I thought for one moment you were not justified in extending your hospitality to the Princess I should certainly say so."

Events are generally too strong for the humble mortals who are content to tread the path of mediocrity. We had already offered sanctuary to the Crown Princess of Illyria. A little painful reflection seemed to shew that to revoke it now would be rather inhuman and rather cowardly. All the same, it was impossible

to view with enthusiasm the prospect of four men in plain clothes continually patrolling the park.

"By the way," said the Chief Constable, "you will, I hope, treat this business of the bombs as strictly confidential. It won't help matters at all to find it in the morning papers."

"I appreciate that; but won't the servants be rather curious about those four sportsmen in plain clothes?"

"Ostensibly they are there to look after a gang of burglars who are expected in the neighbourhood."

"Not exactly a plausible story, I am afraid!"

"The story doesn't matter, so long as they don't suspect the truth. And as Mrs. Fitzwaren's incognito has been so well kept, there is no reason why they should."

So much for the latest development of this amazing situation. From the very moment the curtain had risen upon the first act of the tragi-comedy of the Fitzwarens I had seemed to be cast for the uncomfortable *rôle* of the weak soul in the toils of fate. From the beginning it had been contrary to the promptings of the small voice within that I had borne a part in their destinies. And here they were established under my roof, a menace to my household and the enemies of all peace of mind.

It only remained to make the best of things and to hope devoutly that Fitz would soon arrange to relieve us of the presence of the "Stormy Petrel." But in spite of all the dark knowledge it was necessary to keep locked up in one's heart, there was an aspect of the matter which was rather charming. To watch the lion

and the lamb lying down together, a veritable De Vere Vane-Anstruther playing hostess to the fair *equestrienne* from a continental circus was certainly pleasant.

I think it is up to me to admit that at the core Mrs. Arbuthnot is as sound as a bell. Certainly her demeanour towards her guests was faultless. Indeed, it made me feel quite proud of her to reflect that had she really known the true status of our visitor she could have done nothing more for her comfort and for that of her *entourage*. Her foibles were condoned and "her little foreign ways" were yielded to in the most gracious manner; and after dinner that evening it was a great moment when our distinguished guest volunteered to accompany on the piano her hostess's light contralto.

I took this to be symbolical of the complete harmony in which the day had been spent. Confirmation of this was forthcoming an hour later, when we had the drawing-room to ourselves.

"Really she is not half such a trial as I feared she would be," Mrs. Arbuthnot confessed.

"If you meet people fairly and squarely half-way," said I, in my favourite *rôle* of the hearthrug philosopher, "there are surprisingly few with whom you can't find something in common."

"Perhaps there is such a thing as being too fastidious."

"We are apt to draw the line a little close at times, eh?"

"Some of these Bohemians must be rather interesting in their way," said Mrs. Arbuthnot.

"No doubt they have some sort of a standard to which they try to conform," said I with excellent gravity.

"Of course she is not *exactly* a lady. Yet in some ways she is *rather* nice. Doesn't look at things in the way we do, of course. Awfully unconventional in some of her ideas."

"By unconventional you mean continental, I presume?"

"No, not continental exactly. At least, I was 'finished' in Dresden, but I didn't learn anything of that kind."

"Had you been 'finished' in an Austrian circus perhaps you might have done."

"I hardly think so. They don't seem to be ideas you could pick up. I should think you would have to be born with them. They seem somehow to belong to your past—to your ancestors."

"It has not occurred to me that circus-riders were troubled with ancestors."

"Hardly, perhaps, in the sense that we mean. But there is something rather fine in their way of looking at things."

"A good type of Bohemian would you say?"

"Surprisingly so in some ways. She doesn't seem to care a bit about money and she is absolutely devoted to Fitz. She doesn't seem to care a bit about jewels, either. She has got some positively gorgeous things, and if there is anything I care to have she hopes I'll take it. Of course I shall do nothing of the kind, but I should just love to have them all."

"She appears to have had her admirers in Vienna, evidently."

"That is what one can't make out. She has three tiaras, and they must be priceless."

"Nonsense, *mon enfant*. Even the glamour of the sawdust a thousand times reflected cannot transmute paste into the real thing."

"But the odd part of it is they *are* real. I am convinced of it; and Adèle, my maid, who was two years with dear Evelyn, is absolutely sure."

"Is it conceivable that the possessor of three diamond tiaras would choose to jump for a livelihood through a hoop in pink tights?"

"Yes, I know it's absurd. But nothing will convince me that her diamonds are not real."

"And she offered you the pick of them?"

"The pick of everything except the smallest of the three tiaras, which she thought perhaps her father might not like her to part with."

"One would have thought that he would at least have set his affections upon the largest of the three."

"Really, I can hardly swallow the circus."

"You haven't by any chance asked her the question."

"Dear no! One wouldn't like to ask a question of that sort unless one knew her quite well. I don't think she was ever in a circus at all. Or if she was, she may have been a sort of foundling."

"Stolen by gipsies from the ancestral castle in her infancy. After all, there is nothing to prevent her father being a duke."

"I don't think it would surprise me, although, of

course, she *is* rather odd. But then in all ways she is so different from us."

"Did you observe whether she ate with her knife and drank out of the finger-bowls?"

"Her manners are just like those of anybody else. I am asking Mary to dine here on Friday, so that she can see for herself. It is her ideas that are un-English; yet, judged by her own standard she might be considered quite nice."

"Mrs. Arbuthnot, surely a very generous admission!"

"Let us be fair to everybody. I'm not sure that one couldn't get almost to like her. There is something about her that seems to take right hold of you. Personal magnetism, I suppose."

"Or some uncomfortable Bohemian attribute? Can it be, do you suppose, that the standard the English gentlewoman likes the whole world to conform to would be none the worse for a little wider basis?"

"Don't be a goose! A person is either a lady or she isn't, but she may be frightfully entertaining and fascinating all the same."

"Yes, that has the hall-mark of truth. There are cases in history. Miss Dolly Daydream, for example, of the Frivolity Theatre."

Mrs. Arbuthnot reproved me for the levity with which I treated a grave issue. Upon the receipt of my apology she regaled me with the astounding fact that Mrs. Fitz looked down on the English.

"Is it conceivable?" said I, the picture of incredulity.

"Really and truly she does. Quite laughs at us. Says we are so stupid—*bête*, that's her word. And

she says we are so conceited. She seems to think we have very little education in the things that really matter."

"Is she old-fashioned enough to believe that there is anything that really matters?"

"In a way she does."

"How antediluvian! What does she believe it is that really matters?"

"She seems to think it's the soul."

"Dear me! I hope you made it clear to her that that part of the Englishman's anatomy is never mentioned in good society?"

"She knows that, I think. She says why the Romans are ashamed of it is what she can't fathom."

"She pays us the compliment of comparing us to the Romans?"

"She says we are the Romans."

"In a reincarnation, I presume?"

"I suppose she means that—she is so awfully odd. And for the Romans to give themselves airs is too ridiculous."

"Has she no opinion of the Cæsars?"

"The Cæsars don't amount to much, in her opinion. We are going to have another lesson before long, she says, and it will be a very good thing for the world."

"If by that she means that materialism leads to a *cul-de-sac*, and that it takes a better creed than that to raise a reptile out of the mud, perhaps we might do worse than agree with her."

"She certainly never said anything about any 'isms.' But I don't understand you anyway."

"It seems to me, *mon enfant*, she has had a good deal to say about the 'isms.' But then, as you say, she's so foreign. Was there anything else about her that engaged your attention?"

"Heaps of things. She is terribly superstitious, a tremendous believer in fate. She thinks everything is fore-ordained, and that the same things keep happening over again."

"Doesn't her oddness strike you as rather out of date?"

"Absurdly. But it is not so much her ideas as the way she lives up to them that makes her so different from other people. There was one thing she told me really made me laugh. She said that Nevil was her twin-soul, and that they lived in Babylon together about three thousand years ago."

"I should think that is not unlikely."

"Be serious, Odo."

"There are more things in earth and heaven, Horatio, than are dreamt of in your philosophy. Go to bed like a wise child, and dream of hunting the fox, and see that this Viennese horsewoman doesn't addle that brain too much."

Mrs. Arbuthnot confessed *naïvely* that she didn't feel in the least like sleep.

"I think I'll have another cigarette," she said.

"Sitting up late and smoking to excess will destroy that magnificent De Vere Vane-Anstruther nerve."

"Goose! Yet I am not sure that this circus woman hasn't destroyed it already. Do you know, I've never been in the least afraid of anybody before, but I rather

think I'm a bit afraid of her. She really is wonderfully odd."

A slight tremor seemed to invade the voice of Mrs. Arbuthnot. I was fain to believe that such a display of sensibility was extremely honourable to her. For, even judged as a mere human entity, our guest was quite apart from the ordinary, and it would have implied a measure of obtuseness not to recognise that fact.

Taking one consideration with another, I felt the hour was ripe to let Mrs. Arbuthnot into the secret. As things were going so well, it was perhaps not strictly necessary; yet at the same time I had a premonition that I should not be forgiven if the wife of my bosom was kept too long in innocence of our visitor's romantic lineage.

"That cigarette of yours," said I, "means another pipe for me, although you know quite well that it makes me so bad-tempered in the morning. But I think I ought to tell you something—that is if you will swear by all your gods not to breathe a word to a living soul, not even to Mary Catesby."

Mrs. Arbuthnot pricked up her ears properly.

"Why, of course. You mean it is something about this Mrs. Fitz? I know it."

"What do you know?"

"I can't explain it, but as soon as I spoke to her it came upon me that she was something quite deep and mysterious."

"Well, it happens that she is. Things are not always what they seem. I am going to give you a guess."

"There is something Grand-Duchessy about her. You remember that woman we met at Baden Baden? In some ways she is rather like her."

"And do you remember your old friend the King of Illyria?—'the old johnny with the white hair,' to quote Joseph Jocelyn De Vere."

"The dear old man in the Jubilee procession?"

"The Victor of Rodova; the representative of the oldest reigning monarchy in Europe."

"Yes, yes. Such an old dear."

"Well, our friend Mrs. Fitz happens to be his only child, the Heiress Apparent to the throne of Illyria. What have you to say to that?"

For the moment Mrs. Arbuthnot had nothing at all to say, but she looked as though a feather would have knocked her over.

"It is a small world, isn't it, *mon enfant?*"

"It really is the oddest thing out!" Mrs. Arbuthnot's feminine organisation was quite tense. "It doesn't surprise me, and yet it is really too queer."

"Ridiculously queer that humdrum people like us should be entertaining royalties unawares."

"Not nearly so queer as that she should have married Nevil Fitzwaren. How did she come to marry him?"

"They are twin-souls who lived in Babylon three thousand years ago."

"That is merely silly."

"My authority is her Royal Highness."

"Fancy the Crown Princess of Illyria running off with a man like Fitz!"

"There is reason to suppose that he makes her happy."

"Why, one day she will be Queen of Illyria!"

"She may be or she may not."

"Well, I can't believe it anyway! There is no proof."

"There is no proof beyond herself. And I confess that to me she carries conviction."

For an instant Mrs. Arbuthnot knitted her brows in the process of thought. She then concurred with a perplexed little sigh.

"But how dreadfully awkward it will be," she said in a kind of rapture, "for poor dear Mary Catesby!"

CHAPTER XIX

HER ROYAL HIGHNESS RECEIVES A LETTER

Pledged to secrecy, Mrs. Arbuthnot earned a meed of praise for her behaviour during a crowded and glorious epoch. If you entertain the Crown Princess of an active and potent monarchy it is reasonable to expect that things will happen.

Things did happen in some profusion during the sojourn of her Royal Highness at Dympsfield House. Owing to the course taken by events which I shall have presently to narrate, that sojourn was prolonged indefinitely. The resources of our modest establishment were taxed to the uttermost, but throughout a really trying period it is due to Mrs. Arbuthnot to say that she was a model of tact, discretion and natural goodness.

She would have been unworthy the name of woman —a title not without pretensions to honour, as sociologists inform us—had she not literally burned to communicate her knowledge of the true identity of "the circus rider from Vienna." But some compensation was culled from the fact that her co-workers in the cause of the Public Decency grew increasingly lofty in their point of view. Even the promptings of a healthy hu-

man curiosity would not permit Mrs. Catesby to eat at our board in order that she might see for herself. Mournfully that woman of an unblemished virtue shook her head over us.

"It was not kind to dear Evelyn. It was right, of course, to sympathise with the Fitzwarens in their misfortune. But the place was old, and George understood that it was covered by insurance. And fortunately all the pictures that were worth anything—and some that were not—had been saved. But to take them under one's wing as we had done was Quixotic and bound to give offence. Besides, that kind of person would be quite in her element at the village inn, the Coach and Horses."

Nevertheless, Mrs. Arbuthnot bore every reproof with a stoical fortitude. What it cost her "not to give away the show," to indulge in the phrase of Joseph Jocelyn De Vere, it would be idle to estimate. But she was true to the oath she had sworn on the night of the great revelation. Not to a living soul did she yield her secret.

To Jodey himself what he was pleased to call "the royal visit" was a matter of undiluted joy. It is true that he was turned out of his bedroom, the best in the house, which commands an unrivalled view of Knollington Gorse, and had to be content with humbler quarters; but our Bayard was so perfectly *au courant* with all that had happened, even unto the presence of the four men in plain clothes in the shrubbery, that the situation was much to his taste.

When the Princess was not herself present, it pleased

him to treat the whole thing as a matter for somewhat laborious satire.

"Ain't you got a bit o' red carpet and an awning for the front steps, Mops? And why don't Odo sport his order at dinner? Can't see the use, myself, in having an order if you don't sport it for royalty. Must put your best leg first. Buck up a bit, old gal, else her Royal 'Ighness will think you haven't been used to it. Anyhow, you must tell Parkins to be dam careful how he decants that '63."

In the presence of Mrs. Fitz, however, the demeanour of my relation by marriage was not unlike that of a linesman standing at attention on a field day. His deportment was so fearfully correct in every detail; his attire so extraordinarily nice—he discarded gay waistcoats and brilliant neckties as being hardly "the thing"—his hair was groomed so marvellously, and he was so overpoweringly polite that it was a source of wonder how the young fellow contrived to maintain the standard he had prescribed for himself.

It was a period of anxiety, yet it was not without its interest. In a very short time Mrs. Arbuthnot had divined the *raison d'être* of the four men in the park, but this did nothing to impair her sense of hospitality. Fitz did not favour us with much of his company except in the evening. During the day his energies were absorbed with the arrangements for the rebuilding of the Grange, and, as I gathered, with further provisions for the safety of his wife. All the same, limited as was the time at his disposal, it was our privilege to watch him sustain the domestic character.

Whatever the incongruity of their fortunes, it was clear that Fitz and his wife had a genuine devotion for one another. And in spite of their apartness and the idea they conveyed of living entirely to themselves without reference to the lives of humbler mortals, each seemed to possess a quality worthy to inspire it. In a measure I was privileged to share their confidence during the time they stayed under our roof; and it was characteristic of them both that at heart they had a rather charming and childlike frankness. Each of them revealed unexpected qualities.

I think I am entitled to say that I never shared the hostility they seemed to arouse in others. All his life long Fitz, as far as I had known him, had been condemned to play the part of the black sheep. Partly it may have been due to his habit of refusing to go with the tide; of his declared hatred of any kind of a majority. He had always been a law unto himself, and had given a very free rein to his personality. To me he had ever stood revealed as one capable of anything; of the greatest good or of the greatest evil; and to behold him now in the domestic circle, in close affinity with the magnetic being in whom the whole of his life was centred, was to find him endowed with a charm and a fascination which had no place in the nature of the Nevil Fitzwaren that was seen by the eyes of the world.

To me there was something beautiful and also a little pathetic in the relationship which seemed to exist between these two diverse souls. Their implicit faith in the rightness of each other, their sense of adequacy, was a very rare thing. So many of the ignoble things

of life, questions of material expediency, of shallow prejudice, of partial judgment, they seemed to have ruled out altogether. And this could not have been otherwise if one reflected that a veritable kingdom of this world was the price that had been paid for this true fellowship.

My previous encounters with Mrs. Fitz had been of a somewhat trying nature. But on the domestic hearth she was much less formidable. The impetuous arrogance which had proved so disconcerting to everybody was not so much in evidence. Her charm seemed to become rarefied as it grew more humane. The childlike directness of her point of view began to emerge more and more and to enhance her fascination; indeed, her way of looking at things became a perpetual delight to such sophisticated minds as ours.

Her total inability to take us seriously was quite *piquant*. Our England and all that was in it amused her vastly. She would compare it to an enchanted land in one of Perrault's fairy-tales. But our code of life, our manners and customs, our ideals, our mechanical contrivances and, above all, our solemnity concerning them, never failed to appeal to her sense of humour.

It was my especial pleasure to converse with her after dinner. I should not say that the art of conversation was her strong point, and it was not until she had been a week in our midst that I was able to come to anything approaching close quarters with her. But it was worth making the effort to get past the barrier that was unconsciously erected by her air of disillusion, of patient, plaintive tolerance.

There was a quaint definiteness about her ideas. Touching all questions that had real significance her thinking seemed to have been done for her generations ago. All that lay outside the life of the emotions was to her the wearisome iteration of a constitutional practice, a necessary but somewhat painful part of the order of things.

Perhaps the most surprising thing about her was her humility. The pomp of kingship was to her the hollowest of all chimeras. It merely resolved itself into the guardianship of a profoundly ignorant, an undeveloped and an extremely thankless proletariat. "*Hélas!* poor souls, they don't know what is good," was a phrase she used with a maternal sigh. The divine right of kings was part and parcel of the cosmic order, a fact as pregnant and inviolable as the presence of the sun and the planets in the firmament. To be called to the state of kingship was an extremely honourable condition, "but you had always to be praying." It was also honourable and not so irksome to be an unregarded unit of the proletariat.

I am not sure, but I incline to the belief, that the fact that I had a seat in the House enabled her to support my curiosity with more tolerance than she might have done had I been without some sort of official sanction. She regarded me as a chosen servant of *le bon roi Edouard;* either my own personal grace or that of my kindred had commended itself to the guardian of the state.

"Are not," said I, "the members of the Illyrian Parliament elected by the people?"

"Yes, my father gave the people the franchise in 1890, and the nobles have never forgiven him. So now the people choose their sixty deputies out of a list he draws up for their guidance; the lords of the land choose another sixty from among themselves; and then, as so often happens, if the two Chambers cannot agree, the King gives advice."

"The King of Illyria has heavy duties!"

"My father loves hard work."

"Are you troubled, ma'am, with a democratic movement in Illyria, as all the rest of Europe appears to be at the present time?"

The gesture of her Royal Highness was one of pity.

"*Hélas*, poor souls!"

It was delicate ground upon which to tread. But the fascination of such an inquiry lured me on where doubtless the canons of good taste would have had me stay.

"Would you not say, ma'am, your Republican Party was a menace to the state?"

"They don't know what is good, poor souls." Her voice was gentle. "They will have to learn."

"Will the King be the means of teaching them?"

"*Hélas!* he is too old. It must be left to fate. Poor souls, poor souls!"

During the sojourn of her Royal Highness at Dympsfield House, we saw a good deal of the Chief Constable of our county. In a sense he had made himself responsible for the safety of us all. His vigilance was great, and its unobtrusiveness was part of the man. No precaution was neglected which could minister to our

security; and he gave his personal attention to matters of detail which less thorough-going individuals might have considered to be beneath their notice.

He was particularly insistent that the Princess should give up her hunting, and that she should confine the scope of her activities, as far as possible, to the grounds of the house. To this she was not in the least amenable. An out-and-out believer in fate, and a subscriber to the doctrine of what has to be, will be, the bullets of the anarchist had no terrors for her. To Coverdale's annoyance, she continued to hunt in spite of his solemn and repeated warnings. And when he was moved to remonstrate with Fitz upon the subject, he met with the reply, "She pleases herself entirely."

"But, my dear fellow," said the Chief Constable, "surely you must know that she is exposing herself to grave risks."

"If a thing seems good to her she does it," was Fitz's unprofitable rejoinder.

The great man was frankly annoyed.

"That is very wrong, to my mind," he said with some heat. "It is unfair to those who have made themselves responsible for her safety."

"It is a question of free-will," said Fitz, "and she knows far more about that than most people. And when it comes to a matter of choosing right, she has a special faculty."

So inconclusive a reply merely ministered to the wrath of the Chief Constable, who in private complained to me bitterly.

"I wish to heaven they would quit the country," he

said. "They are a source of endless worry and expense. We do all we can to help them, and I must say the Yard is wonderful, yet they can't be induced to take the most elementary precautions. I regret now, Arbuthnot, that I urged you to shelter them. I had hoped they were rational and sensible people, but I now find they are not."

"You think, Coverdale, the danger is as real as ever?"

"Frankly I do. Ferdinand the Twelfth has played it up so high in Illyria that the Republicans are determined to make an end of the monarchy."

"But didn't she renounce her right to the throne when she married Fitz?"

"In effect she may have done so, but the Illyrian law of succession will not contemplate such an act. Ferdinand makes no secret of the fact, apparently, that he will compel her to marry the Archduke Joseph, and that she must succeed to the throne."

"How is it possible for him to give effect to his will?"

"He is a strong man, and if he sets his mind upon a particular course of action few have been able to deny him."

"Then you think her marriage with Fitz is merely an episode in what is likely to be a brilliant but stormy career?"

"Always provided it is not cut short by one of those bullets it is our duty to anticipate. I can only tell you that the Foreign Office is now very anxious to get her out of the country, and that if they dared they would deport her."

"Ho, ho!"

An academic admirer of our constitutional practice, I was fain to indulge in a whistle.

"And, strictly between ourselves," said the Chief Constable, "if only the right government were in, deported she would be."

"A fine proceeding, I am bound to say, for a country with our pretensions to liberalism!"

"Under the rose, of course." The Chief Constable permitted himself a dour smile. "I daresay it would make a precedent, and yet one is not so sure about that. But one thing I am sure about, and that is that some of us are devilish unpopular in high places. They would not be averse from making things rather warm for certain individuals who shall be nameless. They are pretty well agreed that we ought to have kept our fingers out of the pie. As old L. said to me yesterday, she has got to leave the country, and the sooner she goes the better it will be for all concerned."

All this tended to bring no comfort to the married man, the father of the family and the county member. If anything, it deepened his anxiety.

It is only just to state, however, that this feeling was not shared by Mrs. Arbuthnot. To be sure, she was not acquainted with all that had happened. But as far as she was concerned the element of danger in the case was an essential and rather delightful concomitant to its romance.

The Vane-Anstruther hypersensitiveness to that mysterious ideal "good form" rendered it necessary that Mrs. Arbuthnot should perform a volte-face.

This she proceeded to do with really amazing completeness and efficiency. No sooner was the true identity of our visitor established, than, as far as the ruler of Dympsfield House was concerned, there was an end of the circus-rider from Vienna and all her works. The ingrained Vane-Anstruther reverence for royalty, due I have ever been led to believe to an uncle who held a Household appointment, received full play. The lightest whim of the Princess—except before the servants it was ever the Princess—was law.

Mrs. Arbuthnot did not go without a reward. Such an incursion did she make upon the royal regard that in a surprisingly short time she was addressed as Irene, and about the end of the first week of the visit the intelligence was confided to me that the Princess had asked to be called Sonia. Without a doubt we were living in a crowded and glorious epoch. And I do not think its glamour was in any degree impaired by the strictures of the world.

It is not too much to say that the Crackanthorpe ladies were scandalised by the open and flagrant treason of Mrs. Arbuthnot. She had taken the queen of the sawdust into the bosom of her family. Together they hunted the fox; together they overrode the Crackanthorpe Hounds. Loud and bitter were the lamentations of Mrs. Catesby. The whole county shook its head.

Mrs. Arbuthnot wore the crown of martyrdom with extraordinary grace and nerve. Her conduct in public was marked by a cynical impropriety, a flagrant audacity at which the world rubbed its eyes and wondered.

"I really believe," said Mrs. Catesby one day as together we made our way home through the January twilight, "that if Irene belonged to me I should chastise her. Can you be unaware that she allows the creature to call her by her first name? And Laura Glendinning assures me that with her own ears she heard her address her as Matilda, or whatever the name is she received in baptism."

"Yes, it's a desperate situation," I agreed with a sigh which had perhaps a greater sincerity than it was allowed the credit.

"I hold you entirely responsible," said the Great Lady. "And so does everybody who knows the true facts of the case. That deplorable evening at the Savoy—and now you actually find her house room in order that she may demoralise your wife! What a merciful thing it is that your dear, good, devoted mother, the most refined of women, is no longer with us! By the way, Odo, I suppose you have heard that there is some talk of asking you to resign your seat?"

"That is news to me, my dear Mary, I assure you."

"The Vicar thinks you ought. He seems to think that if you have any Christian feeling about things you will do so on your own initiative."

"It is so like the Church of England not to realise that by the time a man reaches the age of forty he has gone over to Buddha."

"I don't know in the least what you mean, but I hope it is nothing improper. But I can assure you that the Vicar's opinion is shared by others. The Castle is dreadfully wounded. Poor dear Evelyn will never for-

give it—never! No more fishing in Scotland and no more shooting. At any rate, it will be a mere waste of time and money for you to stand again."

It only remained for me to agree very cordially with Mrs. Catesby, and to confess to surprise that my constituents had not made the discovery sooner.

"But," said I cheerfully, "here we are at that fine example of late Jacobean art known as Dympsfield House. I would that I could prevail upon you, Mary, to honour our guest by drinking a cup of tea in her presence. It would be a graceful act which I am sure we should all appreciate."

"I have a conscience, Odo Arbuthnot," said the Great Lady, with a severity of mien that rendered the announcement superfluous. "Also I have some kind of a standard of morals, manners and general conduct which I strive to live up to."

At the gate I said *au revoir* to the outraged matron. Having disposed of my horse, I made my way indoors. The ladies had come home in the car and were at the tea-table already. Among a number of other weaknesses which go with a strong infusion of the feminine temperament, I confess to a decided partiality for the cup which cheers yet does not inebriate.

Mrs. Arbuthnot was pouring out the tea and her Royal Highness was standing in front of the fire. She was reading a letter, and to judge by her brilliantly expressive countenance, its contents were affording a good deal of exercise for her emotions.

"I wish, Sonia, I could convert you to cream and sugar," said Mrs. Arbuthnot, declining to entrust the

cup to my care, but rising importantly and personally handing it to the occupant of the hearthrug.

"Oh, no, t'ank you. Lemon *à la Russe*. What a people to take cream and sugar in their tea!".

She enforced her idea of the absurdity by giving Mrs. Arbuthnot a playfully affectionate pinch of the ear.

"I have a piece of news for you, my child. Now, you must not laugh."

"Oh, no, Sonia, I will not laugh."

The somewhat exaggerated note of Mrs. Arbuthnot's obedience was not unlike that of the model girl of the class being examined by the head-mistress.

"Now, Irene, be quite good. Not even a smile." The Princess held up a finger of mock imperiousness. "Dis is most serious. Shall I tell you now, or shall I to-morrow tell you?"

"Oh, please, please," piped Mrs. Arbuthnot. "Please tell me at once. Is it those absurd Republicans?"

"Oh, no, my child; it is something much more interesting. My father is on his way to England."

In sheer exultation Mrs. Arbuthnot gave a little leap into the air.

"O-oh!" she gasped.

"Think of it, my child! The royal and august one coming to this funny little island, where everything is according to Perrault. He is coming with old Schalk."

"O-oh!" gasped Mrs. Arbuthnot.

"You don't know Schalk. Wait till you have seen Schalk and then you will die. He will kill you quite. He looks like dis, and he walks so."

Her Royal Highness made a face that was really comic and took a few steps across the carpet in imitation of Schalk going to the House of Deputies.

"Are they *really* coming?"

"On Thursday they arrive at Southampton."

"They will go straight to Windsor, of course."

"Oh, no, my child; it is not a visit of state. It is quite a secret, what you call *incognito*. The King is coming to make obedient his wicked daughter. *Hélas!*"

With tragic suddenness the Princess dropped her voice and the laughter died in her eyes. But Mrs. Arbuthnot was far too deeply engrossed in her own wild and extravagant thoughts to pay heed to the change.

"But if the King does not go to Windsor, where else can he go?" said she. "An hotel doesn't seem right, somehow, although, of course, there are some rather nice ones in London."

"I think, my child," said the Princess calmly, "it were best that my father came to us. They have anarchists in London. Besides, I insist that you see Schalk. He will make you laugh until you shed tears."

It was as much as ever Mrs. Arbuthnot could do to keep herself in hand.

"Oh, Sonia," she cried, "do you really think the King will come to us?"

"*Mais oui, certainement*, that is his intention. But it is a secret, a grand secret, you must not fail to remember. *Le bon roi Edouard* must not know he is in this country. His name will be Count Zhygny; and perhaps our good Odo here will be able to find him a little shooting. Hares, partridges, anything that goes on four

legs will amuse him; and you must never forget, my good Odo, that he is the best player at *Britch* in Illyria. Now mind you don't play very high, or he will ruin you. And so will Schalk."

"I thank you, ma'am, for the information," said I gravely.

CHAPTER XX

A LITTLE DIPLOMACY

The announcement that Ferdinand the Twelfth, accompanied by his famous minister, Baron von Schalk, was on his way to this country and that he was coming straight to Dympsfield House can only be described as a blow to one confirmed in the habit of mediocrity. Had I had only myself to consult in the matter, I should have argued with all the vigour of which my nature is capable, that it would be quite impossible for us to put them up. The lack of accommodation that was afforded by our modest establishment; the obscurity of our social state; our radical unfitness for the honour that was to be thrust upon us; all these disabilities and many another surged through my brain, while I laved my tired limbs and struggled into a "boiled" shirt, and tied my "white tie for royalty" in accordance with the sumptuary decree of Joseph Jocelyn De Vere. So acute, indeed, became the conviction that something must be done to turn the tide of events that I was fain to go next door to Fitz. That worthy was in the act of brushing his hair.

"You've heard the news, I suppose?" said I, and as I spoke I caught a glimpse of my own gloomy and shirt-sleeved apparition in a looking-glass.

"What news, old son?" said the Man of Destiny, negligently shaking something out of a bottle on to his scalp. "Not been shootin' at Sonia, have they? Police are devilish vigilant. I'm hanged if we haven't had a couple of mounted detectives with us all day. They rode like it, anyway."

"Do you mean to say you haven't heard?" said I, positively hating the man for his coolness. "Hasn't the Princess told you that her father is on his way to this country, and that he is coming straight to us?"

Fitz laid down his hair-brushes and turned round to face me.

"Get out!" he said. "Ferdinand coming here!"

"Yes; she had a letter this evening to that effect."

Fitz betrayed astonishment. And under the mask of his habitual indifference I thought he also betrayed something else.

"That poisonous old swine coming here!" he muttered.

"Yes; he is coming with Baron von Schalk."

"They generally hunt in couples. He never goes anywhere without his familiar. But I don't like your news at all."

"I like the news as little as you do," said I. "Really, we can hardly do with them here."

Fitz stroked his chin pensively, and then shook his head.

"It looks as though we shall have to put up with them, I'm afraid. If they are really on the way, I don't quite see how we can shirk them. Ferdinand is coming as a private person, I presume?"

"So I gather. But what do you suppose is his motive in making this sudden pilgrimage to see his daughter?"

Fitz did not answer the question immediately.

"It admits of only one explanation," he said at last. "His other scheme having failed, he has the audacity to take the thing in hand himself. But that is his way. Whatever may be thought of his policy and the style in which it is carried out, it can't be denied that he is a very remarkable man. But I wish to God he would keep away from England!"

The son-in-law of Ferdinand the Twelfth ended with an abrupt outburst. Evidently the prospect of coming to grips with his august relation was not to be viewed lightly.

"But it hardly seems right," he said, "for him to take pot-luck at the Coach and Horses. I shall be immensely grateful, Arbuthnot, if you will put him up here, and of course it is quite understood that I stand the shot."

"The question of the shot, my dear fellow, doesn't enter into the case at all. But, you see, we are just simple, ordinary folk, and we are not quite up to this sort of thing; and then again, our accommodation is limited."

"Oh, that will be all right. If you can squeeze in Ferdinand and old Schalk here, their people can stay in the village."

I am not often troubled by anything in the nature of an inspiration, but desperation has been known to quicken the most lethargic minds.

"By Jove," said I, "there's Brasset. He is mounted

on a far better scale than we are. The very man! I'm sure, if the matter were mentioned to him, he would feel himself immensely honoured."

"Yes," said Fitz, "it is not half a bad idea. I will mention it to Sonia."

"Of course, my dear fellow," I explained, "you understand that my wife and I immensely appreciate the honour of entertaining the King of Illyria, and if we only had more resources we should be only too grateful for the chance. I hope you will make that quite clear to the Princess."

Solemnly enough the son-in-law of Ferdinand the Twelfth promised that this should be done, and I descended to the drawing-room in a more equable frame of mind. I was able to eat my dinner in the happy belief that my inspiration had solved an acute and oppressive difficulty. Emboldened by this reflection and sustained by a sense of danger overpast, I even went to the length of attempting to pave the way for the reception of the happy solution.

"By the way," I ventured to announce to Mrs. Arbuthnot at the other end of the table, "Mr. Fitzwaren has suggested that perhaps it would be more convenient for Count Zhygny and his friend the Baron if Lord Brasset entertained them at the Hall. This seems a most happy suggestion, and I am quite sure that Lord Brasset will consider it a very great honour."

Before I had come to the end of this carefully phrased, and, as I hoped, eminently diplomatic speech, a silent but furious signal was despatched by wireless telegraphy across the whole length of the table. A

frown of portentous dimension clouded the brow of Mrs. Arbuthnot as she turned ruthlessly to the picture of amused cynicism who sat beside her.

"Really, Mr. Fitzwaren," said she, "that is nonsense. His Maj—I mean to say, Count Thingamy has expressed a gracious desire to come here, and of course, as I have no need to say, we should be the last people in the world not to respect it. We shall only feel too *proud* and *honoured*, and the longer he stays with us the more *proud* and the more *honoured* we shall feel."

"Quite so, quite so," said I hurriedly. "Those are exactly my views; that goes without saying, of course. But at the same time, Mr. Fitzwaren agrees with me that the accommodation at the Hall is far superior to any that we have it in our power to offer."

"I didn't say that exactly, old son," Fitz turned the tail of an amused eye upon his hostess. "I rather think that is one of the things that ought to be expressed differently. Rather open to misconstruction, as the old lady said when something went wrong with the airship."

"Irene quite understands what I mean," said I with the valour of the entirely desperate. "The Hall, don't you know, is one of the show places of the country—ceilings by Verrio, and so on. Then, of course, Brasset's a peer, and as it were, marked out by predestination to do the honours to Count Zhygny."

There was the imperious upraising of a jeweled paw, in company with a flash of eyes across the rose-bowl in the centre of the table. I was reminded of the lady in Meredith whose aspect spat.

"Your are talking sheer nonsense, Odo. Your father

is coming here, isn't he, Sonia dear? It is all arranged, and there will be heaps of room. Lucinda will go to Yorkshire to see her Granny; and Jodey can go to the Coach and Horses; and you, Odo, can sleep over the stables, and I am sure that Mr. Fitzwaren won't mind giving up the nicest bedroom to his Maj—I should say, Count von Thingamy. You won't, now will you, Mr. Fitzwaren?"

"I am yours to command, Mrs. Arbuthnot," said Mr. Fitzwaren, with his chin pinned down to the front of his shirt, and gazing straight before him with his smiling but sardonic eye. "And if there is anything I can do to add to the comfort of the Count, I need hardly say that I shall be most happy."

"There!" said Mrs. Arbuthnot, triumphantly. "Not another word, please, else Sonia will think we don't deserve such an honour."

Her Royal Highness regaled us all with a benevolent flash of her wonderful teeth.

As one in the coils of fate, I had to submit with the best grace I could to its decree. So far was the sharer of my joys and the participator in my sorrows from viewing the prospect of the royal coming with disfavour, that she might be said to revel in it. There was a fire in her eye, a lightness in her step; the mere thought of the glamour that was so soon to invest her household served to envelop her in an atmosphere of mental and moral elevation that can only be described as lyrical.

Later in the evening I received a Caudle lecture upon my absence of tact. "What posssessed you, Odo, to talk at dinner in that way! I don't know what dear

Sonia must have felt, I'm sure. One would really think, to hear you, that we positively didn't want to entertain the King."

"Let us assume, *mon enfant*," said the desperate I, "in a purely academic spirit, that almost inconceivable hypothesis."

"Really, Odo, there are times when you seem to take a pride in being *bourgeois*."

"In this instance, my child, the indictment justifies itself. All the same, we are what we are; it is hardly kind to hold any man responsible for his antecedents."

"Don't think for a moment that I blame you because your grandfather was in trade; although, of course, trade was not so respectable then as it is now. Why I blame you, Odo, is because you don't always make the best of yourself. That was almost the only thing dearest Mama had against you. Now for the love of goodness, let us hear no more about the King going to the Hall to stay with Reggie Brasset!"

CHAPTER XXI

THE EXPECTED GUEST

In the face of this manifesto by the powers, there was only one course to adopt. That course was submission. Fitz, while professing to sympathise with my embarrassment, was too cynical to help me much. The hospitality of the Hall might be more regal in its character, but then, if the august visitor came to us, think what a snug family party we should be!

The King was due at Southampton that day week, and his dutiful son-in-law proposed to meet him there. In spite of his casual and nonchalant airs, he had an inborn instinct for behaving well on great occasions. Ferdinand the Twelfth having affirmed his determination to visit our shores, it seemed to Fitz that it behooved all concerned to make the best of a bad business. It was a sad bore that he should have decided to do any such thing, but at the same time it might prove an amusing and possibly an instructive experience to have the victor of Rodova dwelling among us in Middleshire.

For Mrs. Arbuthnot these were great days. Almost the first thing she did was to borrow an under-footman from Yorkshire. She also provoked a state of anarchy in the kitchen by engaging for a fortnight a *cordon*

bleu lately in the service of a nobleman. Our much maligned and occasionally inebriated household goddess was fairly good for plain dishes, but certainly not for such as were to be set before a king. Upon inquiry of his daughter as to what dishes would make the best appeal to the royal palate, the Princess was fain to declare that if the victor of Rodova might be said to have a weakness for anything in particular it was for tomatoes.

It was my privilege to be present when, one morning at breakfast, the mandate was issued to Joseph Jocelyn De Vere that for the time being it was necessary that he should seek other quarters.

"I am really so sorry," said his sister in a birdlike voice, "I am really so dreadfully sorry. But what can we do? Two rather important members of the Illyrian Cabinet are coming from Blaenau to see dear Sonia, and of course it is only right that we should put them up."

"That is what all that talk about Count This and Baron That amounts to, is it?" said the young fellow coolly. "Well, now, Mops, you don't suppose I am going to put myself to the trouble of clearin' out for a couple of bally foreigners, do you? This box suits me very well, and the 'Coach and Horses' is quite a second-rate sort of pub."

"You can have your meals here, of course, but it would hardly be right to send foreigners of distinction to the village inn."

"Foreigners of distinction! Why, it would take the King himself to uproot me."

Such a moment was too much for Mrs. Arbuthnot's dramatic sense.

"Well, it so happens," said she, with a carefully calculated unconcern, "it *is* the King himself."

Jodey laid down his coffee-cup.

"Tell that to the marines!" said he.

"If you don't believe me, you had better ask Sonia. Of course, it is a tremendous secret. The visit is a strictly private one, and his Majesty's *incognito* must be rigidly observed."

"I should rather think so," said the sceptical youth, "I expect Fitz is pulling your leg."

"Oh, no, he isn't," said Mrs. Arbuthnot. "Why should he, pray? The King arrives at Southampton on Thursday, and Nevil will meet him there. His Chancellor, Baron von Schalk, accompanies him, and they are coming straight to us."

"If it don't beat cock-fightin'!"

"It is really quite natural that the dear old King should wish to see his daughter," said Mrs. Arbuthnot with pensive dignity.

But it is only fair to Mrs. Arbuthnot to say that her dramatic announcement had wrought sensibly upon her brother.

"I suppose there is no help for it," he said cheerfully. "I expect I shall have to clear out. But I daresay Brasset will find me a crib if I explain how it is."

"There must be not a word of explanation to anybody," said Mrs. Arbuthnot with an official air. "Not a soul must know it is the King."

"Brasset will be all right. He's an awfully diplo-

matic beggar; been an *attaché* at Paris, and so on. You can trust him to keep a secret."

Mrs. Arbuthnot pondered. The gravity of her mien was enormous.

"Well, if you tell Reggie Brasset, you must give me your word of honour that you positively won't speak of it to another living being. Strictly *incog.*, you know, and if it got out there might be serious complications. Of course I had to write and tell Mama, else she would never have let me have Thomas. Besides, she is consulting Uncle Harry upon one or two points of etiquette."

"Oh, is she! Evidently going to be a devilish well-kept secret this is!"

"I should think it was. Why, I haven't even told Mary Catesby, yet I suppose I shall have to, because she is frightfully well up in that sort of thing."

"If you don't disdain a word of advice from a lowly quarter," said I modestly, "you will leave Mary Catesby out of your calculations."

My only guerdon was the flash of an imperious china-blue eye. Other reward there was none.

"Seems to me," said Jodey, "we had better have Brasset to dine with us pretty often. You will want somebody to talk to the old buffer. I'm not much of a hand at conversation myself."

"No, Joseph," I ventured to remark, "but you are good and brave and modest. How goes the ballad that Irene so charmingly discourses? 'Be good, sweet child, and let who will be clever.' "

I desisted, for from two points of the compass a

double-distilled Vane-Anstruther gaze was trained upon me. My relation by marriage drank his coffee and fished out a vile old pipe, and lit it amid the most magniloquent silence to which I have ever been a contributor.

But events were moving apace. The passing of each day brought us sensibly nearer the all-important event. With advice and aid from her Royal Highness, Mrs. Arbuthnot proceeded to set her house in order with no uncertainty. The King liked a room with a south aspect, it appeared, and a bath-room leading out of his dressing-room. By a special dispensation of providence these things happened to be forthcoming. Red was the predominant hue of the carpet and bed-hangings in the chamber of state. The picturesque fancy occurred to Mrs. Arbuthnot that purple would be more appropriate. Her Royal Highness thought it really didn't matter, but Joseph Jocelyn De Vere, who was called in to arbitrate, concurred with Mrs. Arbuthnot. The bill from Waring's was £65 12*s.* 9*d.* less five per cent. discount for cash.

On the morning of Wednesday a paper of instructions arrived from Uncle Harry *via* Doughty Bridge, Yorks. It seemed to attach chief significance to the wine, which should be of the best quality and abundant in quantity. Deponent adjured his niece to be especially careful about the madeira, as all the royalties he had had the honour to meet at table were extremely partial to that beverage. "I am sending a case of ours in the care of Thomas, unknown to your father," was interspersed in the form of a note in the maternal hand. In effect, Uncle Harry's instructions might be said to

resolve themselves into as much madeira and as little fuss as possible.

Fitz also was not inactive. He had accepted the impending visit of his father-in-law, wholly distasteful to him, as there was reason to believe it was, in quite the temper of the philosopher. Since the King's enemies were so rife in our part of the world, the first thing he did was to take the Chief Constable into his confidence. He then went up to town, spent two hours in Whitehall at the feet of more than one Gamaliel, called upon the General Manager of the Great Mid-Western Railway and arranged for a special train to be run through from Southampton to Middleham, and rounded up his day with the purchase of a new silk hat at Scott's.

The historic Thursday came at last, and shortly after seven a. m. Mr. Nevil Fitzwaren set forth to Southampton, arrayed in a very smart Newmarket coat, patent leather boots and his new silk hat. Even when I had witnessed his setting out in the full panoply of war, I could hardly realise that we were on the threshold of so high an occasion. I hope I do not attach an undue importance to the kings of the earth. But even an insignificant unit of a constitutional country, with perhaps something of a slight personal bias in the direction of democracy, could not allay a thrill of lively anticipation of what the day would bring forth.

According to the journals of the age, Ferdinand the Twelfth stood for an advanced type of despot. His word was law in Illyria. I spent half my morning in the hunting up and perusal of a recent number of one

of the magazines, in which appeared a character study of this famous man by one who claimed to know him intimately. Therein he figured as a benevolent reactionary; as one who in the fullest sense of the term believed himself to be the father of his people. He dispensed justice alike to the rich and the poor; but whether he was right or whether he was wrong, he allowed no appeal from his verdicts.

In the opinion of the writer of the article, the King of Illyria was one of the strongest men of his epoch. Poised as had been all his life on the crater of a volcano, which issued continual threats of eruption, he had abated no point of his public or domestic policy in response to the rumblings below. He believed himself to possess an infallible knowledge of that which was good for his people, and he was prone to dispense his universal panacea in liberal doses. Yet he differed fundamentally from other potentates of a similar faith, as, for instance, his Russian nephew and his Turkish and Persian contemporaries, inasmuch that he had faith in the essential virtue of his subjects.

In spite of the fact that the modern distemper of anarchy had infected his kingdom, and had led to three cowardly attempts on his life, Ferdinand the Twelfth had furnished a convincing proof of his strength of character by declining to saddle his people with the responsibility of what he chose to consider as isolated acts of fanaticism. From the earliest times any individual or body of freemen of the Kingdom of Illyria had enjoyed the right of personal access to their sovereign. He was ready to give them advice in the

most commonplace affairs. In many ways he was more like an enlightened friend and neighbour of liberal views than a despotic ruler whose word was law. It was said that he would advise a working-man about the choice of a calling for his son, or he would fix the amount of a daughter's dowry. "To take the King's opinion" had become a proverbial phrase throughout the land; and it was said that in the case of two farmers haggling over the price of a horse that whenever the phrase was used it received a literal interpretation.

The consequence of this accessibility was an abundant popularity among all classes in the state. In living up to the letter of the truly royal tradition that every Illyrian enjoyed the King's friendship, he had conserved his power, and in spite of many a sinister growl in consequence of severe taxation and many flagrant abuses of authority, the volcano had remained inactive throughout a long and not inglorious reign. His campaign in the sixties against the might of Austria, culminating in the historic day of Rodova, had been a wonder for wise men, and had only been rendered possible by the almost superstitious faith of all classes of a comparatively small community.

In his final survey of the character and attainments of one of the most significant figures of the age, the writer of the article indulged in the prophecy that with Ferdinand the Twelfth a symbol of true kingship would pass away. The forces of modernism were too strong in Illyria, as elsewhere in Europe, to be held longer at bay. It was only by a miracle that the doors of the historic castle at Blaenau had been barred against them

so long. Only an extraordinary personal power and an unflinching strength of will had kept them unforced. For none could deny that the sublime example of trusting all men and fearing none had gone hand in hand with the gravest abuses; yet, whatever was their nature, it could at least be said that they owed their origin to no ignoble source. A king in every true essential, Ferdinand the Twelfth had the defects of his qualities. The standard of well being in Illyria was high, but it was by no means widely dispersed. As is the case within the borders of all despotisms, the rich were the rich and the poor were the poor in Illyria. In many respects the condition of the people recalled that of France before the Revolution; and it would be a source of surprise to none who were in a position to observe the present situation if, at the eleventh hour, the fate of Louis XVI overtook this present uncommonly able and uncommonly misguided ruler.

By the light of what this day was to bring forth, I made an anxious study of this document. If I cannot say that I derived reassurance from it, at least it did nothing to diminish my curiosity. It was to be our privilege to entertain a type of true kingliness under our roof. If one of those culinary disasters occurred to which even the best regulated households are susceptible, and we were constrained to offer burnt soup or an underdone cutlet to the father of his people, it was to be hoped that his trembling host and hostess would not have to forfeit their heads.

As far as the King's daughter was concerned, it had seemed to us that the announcement of his coming had

brought unhappiness. Her alert, half humorous, half malicious interest in everything around her which made her charm, had seemed to give place to the brooding preoccupation of one who felt a deep distrust of coming events. In particular I thought this was shown in her relation to her small daughter.

Prior to the receipt of the King's letter, Mrs. Fitz had shown no undue devotion to this piece of mischief incarnate who answered to the name of Marie, who defied her governess, bullied the servants and the domestic pets, and who fiercely contended in season and out with Miss Lucinda, a milder and more legitimate household despot. But by the time we had come to this historic Thursday, it was as though her mother could not bear this elf out of her sight. It was, of course, natural that she should ardently wish that Marie should behave nicely to her Grandpapa, but there was something almost tragic in this new anxiety concerning her. There could be no doubt its root struck deep.

To those who understood her ways and moods, it was clear that something weighed upon her heavily. It was even in the expression of her face; there was a strange decline of her vivacity, and a slackening of interest in the things around her. By the time Thursday came she seemed most unhappy.

The Crackanthorpe had no fixture for that day, and in the light of after events, perhaps, it had been well if they had. All the morning she was curiously silent and *distraite*. She divided more of her time between the stables and the society of her horses and the nursery and the society of her singularly wilful and intractable

daughter. At luncheon she refused every dish, contenting herself with a glass of water and a piece of dry toast. Not a word did she speak until near the end of the meal, when quite suddenly she clasped her hands to her head, and exclaimed in a deep guttural voice, hardly recognisable as her own.

"I t'ink I will go mad!"

There was something indescribably tragic in the exclamation. I rose and withdrew from the room, and made a sign to the servants to follow. Mrs. Arbuthnot was left alone with the unhappy lady, and as I went out I remarked to her that I was going into the library.

About ten minutes afterwards, Irene came to me there. She was looking pale and anxious and not a little alarmed.

"She is suffering dreadfully, poor thing," she said, not without a suspicion of tears. "She is almost out of her reason, and she is making a frantic effort to control herself."

"Can you gather what the trouble is?"

"She has a terrible fear of something. What it is I don't know. She keeps talking in Illyrian."

"Is it her father's coming?"

"Yes, it has upset her dreadfully."

"Is she afraid of him?"

"Yes, pathetically afraid. But there is also something else she fears."

"I suppose she is thinking of her husband and her child?"

"Yes, poor soul! How I wish we could help her!"

"It is not easy to help the children of destiny."

"Never until now have I realised what a dreadful life it is these people lead. She is suffering terribly. Do you know of anybody who understands the stars?"

"The stars!"

"Yes, she says she wants to know what the stars are doing. It is ridiculous superstition, of course, and I told her so. But she shook her head in the oddest way, and she looked so tragic and unhappy that she nearly made me cry."

"Isn't there an astrologer in Bond Street? But it's a hundred to one he's a charlatan."

"They all are, of course."

"The Princess doesn't appear to think so. And there is my cracked old Uncle Theodore who lives in Bryanston Square. He is supposed to be no end of an authority upon the stars."

"Well, it is utterly ridiculous, but I am afraid nothing can be done with her until she has consulted somebody. Give her your Uncle Theodore's address and let her catch the 2.20 to town, and she will be back before the King comes."

"She can't go alone. In her present state of mind somebody must be with her. Can't you persuade her to wait until she has seen her father?"

"She is suffering so much that it would be a mercy to relieve the strain in any way."

"Very well, I will take her to see old Theodore. I will send him a wire to tell him that a lady is coming to consult him about the stars; and also I had better telephone to Coverdale to let him know what's happening. It is hardly wise to go to London without an escort.

Then there is the monarch to be arranged for. But Fitz will wire the authorities direct from Southampton the approximate time of his arrival."

Luckily Coverdale was at the Sessions Hall. But when I informed him of the Princess's sudden determination to go to town by the 2.20 he very nearly fused the wires. How the blank did she suppose that with her blank father due at Middleham at 6.50 the Middleshire Constabulary could arrange for her to go gallivanting to the blank metropolis that blank afternoon? Without venturing in any way to enlighten the official nescience or to mitigate its temperature, I attempted with infinite tact and patience to explain, yet withholding all references to the stars as I did so, that in the circumstances there was no help for it. This being a matter upon which the Princess had fully made up her mind, it behooved the Middleshire Constabulary to defer to her wishes with the best possible grace.

"Well, my friend," said the Chief Constable, "let me tell you, you are running a devil of a risk. But I shall communicate with Scotland Yard, and ask them to look after you. Still, as the King arrives this evening, the four men you have with you had better remain on duty at the house. And," concluded the head of the Middleshire Constabulary, "I would to God the whole blank, blank crowd——!!"

A married man, a father of a family, and a county member somewhat hurriedly replaced the receiver.

CHAPTER XXII

A VISIT TO BRYANSTON SQUARE

Unwillingly enough, I set out with our guest to consult my Uncle Theodore. Assuredly it was a scheme in which commonsense, in the general acceptation of that elusive quality, had no part. Yet, however preposterous the proceeding, it was an act of common humanity to take even an extravagant measure for the relief of such an acute suffering. It was impossible not to pity the unhappy creature. Her eyes were wild and her appearance had been transformed into that of a hunted animal.

On the way up to town we were fortunate enough to secure a carriage to ourselves. Throughout the journey my companion hardly addressed a word to me, but she continued to betray many tokens of mental anguish. The train was punctual, and by a few minutes after four o'clock we were in Bryanston Square.

It is only once in a lustrum that I visit my Uncle Theodore. He is rich, a bachelor, and in the family is regarded as an incorrigible crank. The champion of lost causes, a poet, a radical, a practitioner of the occult, a scorner of convention, and a robust hater of many things, including all that relates to the merely expedient, the utilitarian and the material, he is looked upon as a

dangerous heretic who might be more esteemed if he belonged to a less eminently responsible clan.

Howbeit, I confess that I never visit my Uncle Theodore without feeling constrained to pay a kind of involuntary homage to his personality. He has a way with him; there is something about him which is the absolute negation of the commonplace. He is tall and extraordinarily frail, with a picturesque mop of orange-coloured hair, and a pair of large round eyes of remarkable luminosity, which seem like twin moons of liquid light.

It was our good fortune to find this bravo at home and in receipt of my telegram. I left my companion in another room while I went forth and bearded the lion in his den. Dressed in a velvet jacket, a red tie and a pair of beaded Oriental slippers he was in the act of composition, and was writing very slowly with a feathered quill upon a sheet of unruled foolscap.

"I am writing a letter to the time-serving rag that disgraces us," he said with a kind of languid vehemence "and the time-serving rag won't print it, but I shall keep a copy and publish it in a pamphlet at the price of threepence."

"Then put me down for four copies," said I. "You know I always regard you as one of the few living masters of the King's English."

"The King's English! The King, my boy, has no English. He has less English than the average self-respecting costermonger."

"The well of English undefiled, then."

"That is better. You are perfectly right. It is my

firm conviction that my prose is quite equal to my poetry, and yet these dunces persist in saying that we poets can't write prose. Swinburne couldn't, it's true, and with tears in my eyes I used to beseech him to give up trying. But he was an obstinate little fellow. Milton couldn't, either. But Goethe now, Goethe could write prose as well as I can myself, and so could Wordsworth if he had liked, and so could Shelley. As for that yokel from Stratford-on-Avon, if there is anybody who dares to say he couldn't write prose, I should like to have the pleasure of contradicting him."

"I think," said I, "you will be among the prose-writers after your death. If I survive you, I shall hope to prepare a collected edition of the letters you have had rejected by the newspapers."

"That's a bargain, my boy. I will select them for you. It will be a nice little legacy to leave to posterity. A hundred years hence they will speak of me as the British Lucian who opened the stinking casements of a putrid age and let in God's honest sunlight. What a time we live in, and what a poisonous crew inhabits it! Why, do you know, my boy, we have less real freedom in this country than they have in Illyria."

The totally unexpected mention of the blessed word Illyria startled me considerably. That sinister kingdom was evidently in the air.

"You are right, Theodore," said I. "The stinking casements of a putrid age—that is a phrase I shall remember when next I am at the point of asphyxiation upon the green benches of the Mother of Parliaments."

"What a football-kicking, boat-tugging, gymnasium-

bred crew they must be to stand such an atmosphere day after day, night after night! I shouldn't have thought that a really *polite* man could have existed in it for three days. I wonder what Edmund Burke thinks of the place when he enters it now."

A rough working knowledge of the subject with which I had to cope rendered it imperative that I should make a determined effort to lay hold of his head before he took charge of me altogether.

"Theodore," said I, "I am not here to yield to the delight of your conversation, much as I yearn to do so. I have brought a lady with me who desires to consult you about the stars."

He seemed to laugh a deep, hollow laugh out of the depths of himself, much as an ogre might be expected to do.

"Vain superstition!" he guffawed, as he stretched out his long tenuous hands. "O ye upper-middle class British Pharisees, that ye should condescend! Who is this weak vessel that would consult the stars? Not, I trow and trust, a daughter of the late Sir John Stubberfield, Bart.?"

"The late Sir John Stubberfield, Bart.," was a symbol erected permanently in his mind, with which he toyed when he was moved to exercise his fancy at the expense of his countrymen.

"Not a daughter of Sir John," I assured him. "An even more potent personage."

"Impossible, my boy! A veritable daughter of Sir John stands at the apex of human endeavour. She is the crown of social, political and philosophical beati-

tude. Do you forget that it was a daughter of Sir John Stubberfield, Bart., who married a Prosser? Do you forget it was a daughter of Sir John Stubberfield, Bart., who had issue an heir male, a little Prosser?"

"Peace, peace, my good Theodore. You have a bare half-hour in which to read the stars in their courses for a fair unknown. And I beg that you will treat her tenderly, for she is a brave woman and an unhappy."

"Aha!" The Ogre—the name he was known by in the family—sighed a romantic sympathy. It may seem out of harmony with the terms in which I have endeavoured to render the personality of this Berserk, but he had an almost quixotic development of the sense of chivalry. Nothing so greatly delighted this champion of lost causes as to succour those who were in distress.

"Produce the languishing vestal, so that the arts of the necromancer may sustain her. But stay, my boy; before we go further, may I suggest that you conform to the conventional practice of confiding the name she goes by among men?"

"Certainly. Her name is Mrs. Nevil Fitzwaren."

"Aha!" The Ogre swung half round in his writing chair to confront me. He seemed like a satyr, and the twin moons that were his eyes began to magnetise me with their uncanny effulgence. "A woman about thirty, of foreign extraction?"

"Ye—es."

"Married an English squire about five years ago?"

"How the deuce do you know that?" said I in amazement.

Again the look of the satyr seemed to transfigure him.

"What, pray, is the use of being a soothsayer without one is permitted to dabble a little in the black arts?"

"Theodore, my friend," said I with a somewhat disconcerted laugh, "I am inclined to think you must be the Devil."

"Perchance, my dear boy, perchance." The Ogre placed the tips of his fingers together in a way he had. "May it interest you to know that the Devil is a more potent figure in the public life of our little day than our German friends allow for. Never despise the Devil, and never mention him lightly in any company, for he is always looking at you."

The twin moons were enfolding me with a refulgence that in the dim January twilight was so uncanny that, had I been other than of a fairly robust materialistic texture, I might have felt a kind of horror.

"It is very interesting that your friend Mrs. Fitzwaren—black hair, olive complexion, remarkable appearance, a type you can't place—should come to me like this. The fact is, my dear boy, things are not always what they seem. Judging by the recent behaviour of one or two rather important planetary bodies, and of the new body of which our observant French friends have lately learned to take cognisance, the visit of your friend Mrs. Nevil Fitzwaren to your cracked Uncle Theodore at his local habitation in Bryanston Square may have some kind of a bearing on the destiny of nations. How say you?"

"My dear Theodore," I expostulated, from motives of policy, "my dear Theodore, you really are, 'pon my word you really are——"

All the same, it was with a singular complexity of emotion that I went forth to lead this prophet and soothsayer into the presence of the Crown Princess of Illyria.

It struck me as I preceded my carpet-slippered relation into the great bare room that the unhappy lady was looking more distinguished and more distraught than ever. Had I had a merely superficial acquaintance with our family Berserk I must have had qualms as to the mode of his reception of his visitor. In uncongenial company he could be a positive Bœotian savage, but, again, if it pleased him, he could display an ease and a sympathetic charm of bearing which was wholly delightful to those who had the good fortune to call it forth.

As he came shambling in with his flaming tie, his mop of orange-coloured hair, his hands in his pockets and his heels half out of his slippers, would it please him to be the polished and gracious courtier, or the wild Bœotian savage?

His visitor rose to receive him and a grave bow was exchanged. And for the first time in my knowledge of her Mrs. Fitz seemed at a loss for speech. Small wonder was it, for this gaunt, lean presence with the faun-like smile and the still, full, luminous gaze, seemed to hold the key to realms of infinite mystery and power.

"If you will come to my room, we can talk," he said quite gently.

As he was about to lead the way, he half turned and leered at me ogre-like over his shoulder with his peculiarly significant malice.

"Tell Peacock to give you the *Sporting Times* and a cigar and a whiskey-and-soda, my dear boy," he said.

"Thanks," said I, "but I am afraid you cannot be allowed more than twenty minutes for your interview. It is imperative that Mrs. Fitzwaren should catch the 5.28 from the Grand Central."

"The 5.28 from the Grand Central." He repeated the words as though an importance was attached to them that they had no reason to claim. Then he added musingly, "I am not so clear as I should like to be that you will be wise to catch it. It would be better, I think, if Mrs. Fitzwaren could arrange to travel to-morrow."

"Impossible, my dear Theodore. Mrs. Fitzwaren is staying with us, and we must certainly be back to dinner."

The Princess nodded her concurrence.

"Well, well, if you really must. And perhaps I exceed my prerogative."

The singular creature proceeded to lead the way to his study. I was left to meditate alone for twenty minutes upon this latest expression of his personality. Never before had I realised so fully that he was the possessor of gifts the nature of which was as a sealed book to the common mortal. There had been occasions when we "in the family" had been tempted to believe that there was a strong infusion of the charlatan in his pretension to occult knowledge. A prophet is not without honour save in his own country.

But as I sat this January evening in his house in Bryanston Square, I realised more fully than I had ever done before that the last word has yet to be uttered in regard to the things around us. It was as though all at once my cranky relation in his carpet slippers, his velvet coat and his red tie had brought me into a more intimate contact with the Unseen.

Somehow, and for no specific reason that I was able to discover, my unruly nerves began to tick like a clock. The temperature of the room was not high, but a perspiration broke out all over me. A full five minutes I sat in the silence of the gathering darkness not quite knowing what to do and not caring particularly. It was as though the enervating atmosphere of my uncle's nearness had taken from me the power of volition.

It never occurred to me to ring the bell, and yet I had merely to press the button at my elbow. Nevertheless, when a servant entered with a lamp it was a real relief.

"Hullo, Peacock!" said I, issuing with a little shiver from my reverie.

Somehow it seemed that that retainer, trusted, elderly, responsible, looked singularly pale and meagre in the lamplight.

"Are you very well, Peacock?"

"Thank you, sir, not very." The old servant sighed heavily.

"Why, what's the matter?"

The old fellow proceeded to draw the curtains and then turned to face me with a kind of nervous defiance.

"Fact is, Mr. Odo," he said, "this place is getting

too much for me. I am afraid I sha'n't be able to go on much longer. Fact is, Mr. Odo"—the old man lowered his voice to a whisper of painful solemnity—"it is contrary to the will of God."

"What is contrary to the will of God?"

"The goings on, sir, of Mr. Theodore. My private opinion is—and I say to you, Mr. Odo, what I wouldn't say to another—" The voice of the old fellow grew lower and lower—"that Mr. Theodore is getting to know a bit more than any man ought to; in fact, sir, more than the Almighty intended any man should."

"What do you mean, Peacock? You are not growing superstitious in your old age, are you?"

I strove to speak in a light tone. But in my own ears my voice sounded curiously high and thin.

"I mean this, sir. The line ought to be drawn somewhere. And Mr. Theodore doesn't know where to draw it. The people he has here, sir, it's—well, it's appalling! Clairvoyants, mediums, mahatmas, Indian fakirs, table-turners, spirit-rappers and I can't say what. Communion with spirits is all very well, sir, but it is contrary to the will of God. The Almighty never intended, sir, that we should pry into all the secrets of existence."

"How do you know that, Peacock?"

"I know by this, sir." The old fellow tapped the centre of his forehead solemnly. "The thing that lies behind this."

To my surprise the old servant wrung his hands and burst into tears.

"It can't go on, sir—at least, as far as I am con-

cerned. Either Mr. Theodore will have to mend his ways or I shall have to leave him. I have been a long time with Mr. Theodore and of course I was with his father before him, and I daresay I am getting old, but do you know what we have got in the attic, sir?"

"What have you got in the attic, Peacock?"

"An Egyptian mummy, sir. It is several thousand years old, and I am convinced that a curse is on it. I wouldn't enter that attic, sir, not me, not for all the wealth of the Rothschilds."

"I was not aware that you were superstitious, Peacock," said I with a very ineffectual assumption of the formal tone of the married man, the father of the family and the county member.

"It is not superstition, sir, but I know what I know. That mummy has got to leave this house, or I shall leave it."

"Is that the fiat of the True Believer?"

"I don't fear God the less, sir, because I fear an Egyptian mummy, if that is what you mean."

"But you are inclined to think there are more things in earth and heaven than it is well for the average man to be concerned with?"

"I am convinced of that, sir; and if Mr. Theodore doesn't get rid of that mummy and amend his goings on, I shall be compelled to give notice."

Stated baldly, the old fellow's words may seem ridiculous. But as he uttered them his distress was so sincere that it was impossible to deny him a meed of sympathy.

"Quite right, if you do, Peacock," I agreed. "And

you can lay it to that honest conscience of which you are rightly proud that you have served the family long and faithfully, and that no one will question your right to an annuity."

"Oh, that will be all right, sir," said the old retainer; "even if Mr. Theodore does act contrary to the will of God, nobody can deny that he is a perfect gentleman."

"Is not that rather a confirmation of the ancient theory that the Devil was the first perfect gentleman?"

"I have not thought of that before, sir, but now you mention it, it is certainly worth thinking about."

Having lent sanction to this profound truth, the old fellow went out of the room. But I recalled him from the threshold.

"By the way, Peacock, Mr. Theodore told me to ask for the *Sporting Times,* a cigar and a whiskey-and-soda."

"Very good, sir." The old fellow withdrew.

"And thank God for them!" I muttered devoutly to the bare walls.

CHAPTER XXIII

PROVIDES AN ILLUSTRATION OF THE THEORY THAT THINGS ARE NOT ALWAYS WHAT THEY SEEM

When the old man returned with this sustenance for the material state, I was moved to inquire how it was that such an intellectual rawhead and bloodybones as this too-assiduous diver into the sunless sea of the occult should subscribe to a journal of such a texture and complexion.

"Is it, Peacock, do you suppose, that, like Francis the first Lord Verulam, he would take all knowledge for his province?"

"He goes racing, sir," said Peacock, not without a suggestion of pride. "And, what is more, sir, he wins so much money that none of the bookmakers will have anything to do with him these days if they can help it. Why, do you know, sir, he has given me the name of the winner of the Derby three years running a whole fortnight before the race."

"Did you reconcile it with your conscience, Peacock, to back the horse?"

"Not the first time, sir, because, you see, I was hardly convinced it would win. It was a new fad with him then. But when I found it did win, and he gave me the tip the

next year, it seemed to be flying in the face of Providence, as it were, to throw away the chance, so I had on a sovereign and won nine pounds ten."

"And the third time, Peacock?"

"The third time, sir, I made it five and I won forty. And if I can stand his goings on, sir, until next Epsom week, and he gives me the tip again, I intend to put on all my savings."

I had scarcely the heart to ask the old fellow what his conscience had to say in the matter. Doubtless it was one of those organisms that only responded to the call of the higher metaphysics. It was a patrician conscience, no doubt, which only concerned itself with the ultimate.

Anyhow, before I could gratify my curiosity on this point, the re-emergence of my Uncle Theodore saved his retainer from an inquiry. A glance at my watch convinced me that we had not a moment to lose if we were to catch the 5.28 from the Grand Central station.

Uncle Theodore took an almost paternal leave of his visitor. He conducted her to the taxicab which awaited us; and in a voice of gentleness, of winning deference, he bade her God-speed. When she offered him her hand, as it seemed almost timidly, he pressed it to his lips.

"Fear nothing," I heard him say under his breath softly, and I thought the unhappy lady smiled wanly with her great gaunt eyes.

As I was about to enter the cab, Theodore placed his hand on my shoulder.

"Look after her, my dear boy." His voice had the fervour of a benediction.

My companion appeared to have shed much of her distraction in the course of her interview with the weird inhabitant of Bryanston Square. The sovereignty of the soul seemed once more in her keeping. No longer did she convey the impression of one passing through an insupportable mental crisis. Whatever fate had in store for her, it was as though she had strength to endure it.

It was in the nature of a race against time to the Grand Central station. I had promised the driver of our taxi a substantial guerdon if he caught the train. Undoubtedly he did his best, but fate decreed that he was not to earn it. An anxious study of my watch revealed the issue to be still in the balance; but just as it began to seem that we were gaining a little on the clock, there came a sharp report, followed by an almost simultaneous crash of glass, and then a confused succession of happenings.

Our vehicle stopped abruptly; a brief interval of nothingness seemed to intervene; and the next thing of which I was cognisant was that the lights had gone out and that a man with a pale face and a straw-coloured moustache was looking in at us through the window.

"Hope you are not hurt, sir." The voice sounded remote, but I could detect its note of anxiety. "Is the lady all right?"

Somewhat dazed, almost as if I were passing through a dream, I heard the voice of my companion speaking with calmness and reassurance. Then I heard the voice of the man again:

"I am afraid your Royal Highness will have to go on in another taxi."

And then the door opened, and I got out unsteadily and found myself in the midst of much traffic and a press of people. I then grew conscious that some of these had a way with them, and that they were directing things with a sort of calm officiousness.

My dazed senses welcomed the helmet of a policeman.

"Call a taxi, please," said I, addressing him in a voice that somehow did not seem to belong to me. "Must catch the 5.28 Grand Central, whatever happens. Will give you my card."

As I spoke I turned to help my companion out of the vehicle, and in the act nearly measured my length on the kerb. Strong and sympathetic hands seemed to come about me, and again the voice of the man with the straw-coloured moustache, sounded in my ear, decisive but kindly and respectful.

"There is a doctor across the road, sir. Can you walk, sir? Lean your weight on me."

"5.28 Grand Central," was my incoherent, almost involuntary rejoinder. "The Princess."

"Yes, yes, sir," said the voice of my friend in need breaking in again on my senses. "The Princess will be all right with us."

Almost as if by magic a passage was made for us through the whirlpool of traffic. We seemed to be in the middle of a street that appeared quite familiar and policemen and extremely efficient persons in dark overcoats seemed to abound.

"The Princess," I continued to mutter vaguely at intervals.

"I am with you," said a low and calm voice at my side.

She was helping my unknown friend to support me across the road. By some subtle means her nearness seemed to brace and stimulate my faculties.

"I fear we shall not catch the 5.28, ma'am," I said.

"What *does* it matter?" The tone of her voice seemed to give me strength and capacity.

A few yards away, down a side street, was the house of a doctor. It seemed but a very little while before I was in a cosy, well-lighted room, with a fire burning cheerfully, and a tall, genial individual with a red head and a Scotch accent was talking to me and holding me by the arm.

"Pray sit down, madam," I heard him say in his pleasant brogue. "I hope you are none the worse for your accident?"

"Not at all, t'ank you," replied my companion in a cordial tone; and then the man who had taken charge of me was heard to say to a colleague who had followed us into the house, "Perhaps the Doctor will allow you to use his telephone, Mr. Johnson. Ring up the Superintendent and then go and see what Inspector Mottrom is doing."

The Doctor gave me a bottle to sniff, and then for the first time I realised that I had an intolerable stinging in the arm. I glanced at it and saw that the sleeve of my coat was soaked with blood.

"If you will come into the surgery," said the Doctor,

following the direction of my glance, "we will have a look at it. A breakage of glass, apparently."

"Yes," said my friend in need, who was evidently a Scotland Yard inspector, answering for me promptly, "the cab was pretty well smashed up." Then he added in an undertone for my private ear, "Don't mention the shots, sir. I am going to telephone to the railway people to arrange for a special train as soon as you are ready to go on. I think it will be safer, and two of our inspectors will accompany the train."

"Thank you very much indeed," I said gratefully.

Never until that moment had I fully realised the organised efficiency of the Metropolitan Police.

As soon as I entered the surgery I came perilously near to a fall on the carpet, somewhat to my disgust, for I appeared to have sustained no injury beyond the damage to my arm. Further recourse, however, to the smelling-bottle defeated this temporary weakness.

After traversing the injured member with light and deft fingers, the Doctor procured a bowl of warm water, a sponge and a pair of scissors. He cut away the sleeve of the overcoat, then of the coat and the shirt, revealing a state of things at which I had no wish to look. After the application of an antiseptic in warm water he was able to give an opinion.

"I am afraid," he said, "this is not the work of glass." He worked over the quivering flesh with a finger. "A bullet has been at work here. It has glanced along the lower arm apparently, but it does not appear to have lodged in it. An incised wound. There may be a fracture. Can you move your arm in this way?"

With this request I was able somewhat painfully to comply.

"That is good," said the Doctor. "No fracture."

It was surprising how soon and how readily the injured member yielded to the deft skill of this good Samaritan. Twenty minutes of assiduous treatment, which, however, was fraught with some pain, as it included the operation of stitching, did much not only for the damaged limb but also for its owner. By that time I seemed to have quite overcome the shock of these events; and with my arm encased in bandages and resting in a black silk handkerchief, and the good Doctor having lent me an overcoat to replace my own mutilated one, I was given a pretty stiff brandy-and-soda and pronounced fit to travel.

"It is undoubtedly the work of a bullet," said the Doctor at the end of his labours. "But I suppose it is no business of mine. If I am not mistaken, the men who brought you here are Scotland Yard detectives."

I smiled at the Doctor's perspicacity and asked him to be good enough to take a card out of my cigar-case.

"Some day, perhaps, I shall be able to explain to you what the accident really was and how it came to happen. In the meantime I cannot do more than thank you most sincerely for all that you have done for me."

There and then I took leave of this true friend, and with a sense of devout thankfulness that I was no worse off than I was, I continued the journey to the Grand Central station. When at last we came to that well-known terminus the great clock over the entrance was pointing to five minutes past six.

Our arrival there seemed an event of some importance, to judge by the demeanour of a number of people who appeared to take an interest in it. Indeed, so much respectful attention did it excite that it seemed to be rather in the nature of an anti-climax to have to pay our Jehu.

As soon as we had entered the booking-hall no less a personage than the station-master, frock-coated and gold-laced, came up to us and took off his hat.

"Train ready to start, sir, as soon as her Royal Highness desires. Platform No. 5. This way, sir, if you will kindly follow me."

We passed along to Platform No. 5, engaging as we did so the good-humoured interest of the British Public. Here a special saloon was awaiting us, also a carriage for the accommodation of our friends from Scotland Yard. By a quarter past six we had started on our journey.

My companion had borne all our vicissitudes *en route* from Bryanston Square with the greatest fortitude and composure. It was no new experience for her chequered life to be exposed to the bullets of the assassin. This latest effort of the King's enemies she appeared to regard with stoical indifference. Even in the shock of the calamity itself she did not lose her self-possession. And through all our tribulations her attitude of maternal solicitude was charmingly sincere.

As I came to regard her from the opposite corner in our special saloon, it was clear that a great change had been wrought in her by the visit to the magician of Bryanston Square. It was a change wholly for the

better. In lieu of the overwrought intensity which had been so painful for her friends to notice, was that calm and assured outlook upon the world of men and things which had ever been her predominant characteristic in so far as we had known her.

"Irene will scold me dreadfully," she said, "for bringing you home like this."

"Surely it is the reverse of the case, ma'am. Instead of me looking after you, I really don't know what I should have done without your help."

"My poor Odo, you won't be able to hunt for a month at least."

"Perhaps it is for the best. I shall have more time to think about the dragon of socialism which is threatening to devour us all."

"Even here you have that disease"—there was a half-humorous life of the royal eyebrow—"even in this quaint place. Why, it is a disease that is spreading all over the world. If only the dear people would understand that it was never intended that they should think for themselves; that it is so much wiser, so much less expensive, so much more profitable in every way that they should have those who are used to policy to think for them! How can Jacques Bonhomme, dear, good, ignorant, stupid fellow, know what is good for him, what is good for his country, what is good for Europe, what is good for the whole world!"

"The trouble, ma'am, as far as this island is concerned, is that our Jacques is becoming such a shrewd, sensible personage, who is learning to go about with his eyes uncommonly wide open."

"Ants and bees and dogs and horses, my good Odo, are shrewd and sensible enough, but Jacques must learn to keep his place. Everything is good in its degree, but I cannot believe that a watchmaker is fitted to wind up the clock of state any more than a common soldier is fitted to win the day of Rodova."

"Ah, the day of Rodova! I wonder if we shall find the Victor waiting for us when we get back to Dympsfield House."

I thought a faint cloud passed over the brows of my companion.

"*Mais, oui,*" she said in a soft, low tone. "I wonder. And old Schalk. He is such a character. You will die when you see Schalk."

"A very able minister, is he not, ma'am?"

"Like all things, my good Odo," said her Royal Highness, "Schalk is good in his degree. He has his virtue. He is learned in the law, for instance, but there are times when like poor Jacques Bonhomme, Schalk would aspire to take more on his shoulders than nature intended they should bear. But there, do not let us complain about Schalk. He is the faithful servant of an august master; do not let us blame him if he grows old and difficult. I once had a hound that grew like Schalk. In the end I had to destroy the honest creature, but of course that is not to say my father will destroy Schalk."

"Quite so, ma'am," said I, with a grave appreciation of the fine distinction that it might please his Majesty to draw in the case of Baron von Schalk.

I relapsed into reverie. What kind of a man was

this celebrated sovereign? How would he harmonise with the humble middle-class English setting to which he was on the point of confiding himself? At this stage it was vain to repine, but as I reclined on the cushions of our royal saloon, with my arm throbbing intolerably and my temples too, what would I not have given to be through with the onerous duty of entertaining such a guest!

As thus I sat with our train proceeding full steam ahead to Middleham, my nerves began to rise up in mutiny. Why, oh, why! had I not been firmer? What could a comparative child, without the slightest experience of any walk of life save her own extremely circumscribed one, know of the exigencies of such a situation? How could she appreciate all that was involved in it? A kind of mental nausea came upon me when I realised that I had allowed myself to become responsible for the personal safety and the general well-being of the King of Illyria during his sojourn in England.

The anxieties in which his daughter had involved us were severe enough, but in the case of her father they seemed a hundred times more complex. Certainly they were far too much to ask of any private individual in the middle station of life. It was in vain that I invoked an incipent sense of humour. Sitting alone with a Crown Princess in a special train, with a bullet wound in your arm, is not apparently an ideal situation in which to exercise it. I might laugh as much as I liked at poor George Dandin himself. His embarrassments in the pass to which his wife's infatuation for realms beyond their own had brought him might be truly comic,

but the married man, the father of the family and the county member was quite unable, in his present shattered condition, to accept them with the detachment due to the true Olympian sense.

Not to put too fine a point upon the matter, the married man, the father of the family and the county member was in an enfeebled mental, physical and moral state when our special made its first stop. With a startled abruptness I emerged from my unpleasant speculations. Could we be at Middleham already? Hardly, for according to my watch it was only ten minutes past seven. I let down the window and found that it was Risborough.

In about a minute the guard of the train, the local station-master and the two detectives who were accompanying us as far as Middleham, came to the door of the carriage.

"Extremely sorry, sir," said the station-master, "but you won't be able to go beyond Blakiston. There's been a terrible accident to the 5.28."

My heart gave a kind of dull thump at this announcement.

"The driver ran right through Blankhampton with all the signals against him. The train has been smashed up to matchwood."

"My God!"

The station-master dropped his voice.

"The full number of casualties has not yet been ascertained, sir, but at least half the passengers are killed or injured."

"How ghastly!"

"Awful, sir, awful. It is the worst accident we have ever had on the Great British system."

"Poor souls, poor souls!" said my companion. "God rest them!"

"We haven't had a really bad accident for twenty-two years. But this breaks our record with a vengeance. I can't think what the poor chap was doing. As good a driver as we've got, to go and do a thing like that——"

The station-master, a venerable and grizzled man with a stern, heavily-lined face, suddenly lost his voice.

"Fate," said my companion with a sombre smile. "Who shall explain the workings of destiny?"

Who, indeed! Had it not been for the bullets of the would-be assassin we should, in all probability, at that moment have been both among the dead. What, after all, does our human foresight matter in the sum of things? All the same, I could not help recalling with a sense of wonder my Uncle Theodore's anxiety that we should not travel by the ill-fated 5.28.

"You will be able to go on as far as Blakiston," said the station-master, "and the Company has arranged for motor cars to meet the train to take you on to Middleham."

"What is the distance from Blakiston to Middleham?"

"About eighteen miles."

When the train went forward the current of my thoughts was altered completely. My former speculations seemed mean beyond comparison with such an event as this. Who shall read the ways of Providence?

A flesh wound in the arm and a late dinner were a small price to pay after all.

Upon arriving at Blakiston we found two motor cars awaiting us: one for the Princess, the other for our escort. A consultation with the chauffeurs disclosed the fact that by proceeding direct home *via* Parlow and Little Basing instead of by way of Middleham, a matter of seven miles would be saved. Therefore, after a wire had been sent to Middleham to inform our people of this change of route, we entered upon the final stage of our adventurous journey.

In spite of the fact that we exposed ourselves to the charge of driving recklessly, even if not to the actual danger of the public, our destination was reached without further mishap. By twenty-five minutes to nine we had turned in at the lodge gates of Dympsfield House. All the windows of that abode were a blaze of light. Doubtless the royal guest had arrived and, let us hope, was enjoying his dinner.

However, no sooner had we entered the house than we were met by Mrs. Arbuthnot. She was dressed for a gala night, very *décolletée* in her best gown, carrying a great quantity of sail in the way of jewels—jewels were being worn that year—and with a coiffure that absolutely baffles the pen of the conscientious historian. But, alas! Mrs. Arbuthnot was on the verge of tears.

CHAPTER XXIV

HIS ILLYRIAN MAJESTY FERDINAND THE TWELFTH

His Majesty had not arrived, and the dinner was spoiling.

"No news of the King?" I asked, keeping well in the background, for I had no wish for Mrs. Arbuthnot to observe my condition prematurely.

"Nevil said in his telegram that he would be here about a quarter past seven, and it is now five minutes past nine," said Mrs. Arbuthnot tearfully.

"Five-and-twenty minutes to nine, *mon enfant*, according to Greenwich," said I as reassuringly as the circumstances permitted. "Your clock is wrong by half-an-hour. But there has been a bad accident at Blankhampton. Would they come by Blankhampton? If they did, that would be bound to delay them."

"Oh dear!" said Mrs. Arbuthnot. "If anything has happened to the King! And oh, Sonia dear, how late you are!" she added reproachfully. "I was getting so horribly nervous about you. And you not here to present me or anything! But now you've come it is all right. Just be a dear and have a look at the table before you go up to dress."

The Princess, however, had scarcely had time to yield

to Mrs. Arbuthnot's suggestion, and I was in the act of walking upstairs in a state of uncomfortable anxiety in regard to the operation of changing my clothes, when from the vicinity of the hall door there came the sounds of fresh arrivals. I hurried to it, to be greeted immediately by the voice of Fitz.

"Rather late," he said with that air of languor which afflicted him on great occasions. "Line blocked at Blankhampton. Devil of a smash. Tiresome cross-country journey, but we've turned up at last."

"Safe and sound, I hope?"

"Right as rain."

As we walked together down the front steps to the open door of the car that stood at the bottom in the darkness, I was conscious that my pulse was a thought too rapid for a tacit subscriber to the theory of democracy. I held the door while an enormous figure of a man disengaged himself slowly, and not without difficulty, from the interior.

I made a somewhat lower bow than the Englishman in general permits himself. A smiling and subtle visage, at once handsome and venerable, was promptly turned upon me, and I found myself exchanging a cordial and powerful grip of the hand.

Ferdinand the Twelfth ascended the front steps in the charge of his son-in-law, while I held the door for the second occupant of the car to alight. I made an obeisance only a shade less in depth than the one I had bestowed upon the Sovereign. Baron von Schalk was small and dapper, with a face full of intelligence and not unlike that of a bird of prey. As we exchanged

bows, it seemed that every line of it, and there were many, was eloquent of power.

"I hope the journey has not tired his Majesty?" I ventured to say. "It must have been very tedious."

Baron von Schalk smiled passively, made a deep guttural noise and answered in very tolerable English, "On the contrary, most interesting. The King never tires himself."

At the top of the steps, framed in a glow of soft light from within, were Mrs. Arbuthnot and the Princess. Standing side by side, they appeared to be vying with one another in the depth and grace of their curtseys. No sooner had the King ascended to them than he took a hand of each in his own and led them into the hall, as though they had been a pair of his small grandchildren. There was a spontaneity about the action which was charming.

Half-an-hour later we were assembled in the drawing-room. The King promptly offered his arm to his hostess, and led the way in the direction of her unfortunate meal. His daughter placed her hand very lightly upon the arm of the Chancellor, directing an arch look over his shoulder at me as she did so, as if she would say, "There is no help for it!"

Fitz and I, walking side by side, brought up the rear of the procession. The Man of Destiny had a very fell visage.

"What have you done to your arm?" he asked.

"Got smashed up in a taxi this afternoon."

"Where?"

"Oxford Street, I believe."

"What were you doing there?"

"The Princess had important business in town, and I went with her."

"Important business in town! She never said a word to me about it. Was she in the accident too?"

"Yes, but luckily she didn't get a scratch. And of course this is only a slight superficial wound."

The slight superficial wound did its best to contradict me by throbbing vilely.

Ferdinand the Twelfth sat on the right of his hostess, his Chancellor on her left. It is the due, I think, of our recently and temporarily imported culinary artist, lately in the service of a nobleman, to say that he had done extremely well in trying circumstances. There is no sauce like hunger, of course, but it was observed that the King ate heartily, and, although verging upon the statutory term of human life, seemed not one penny the worse for his long and trying journey.

He spoke English with an agreeable fluency. Not only did he know this country very well indeed, but we gathered that he was accustomed to find it pleasant. Seen across a dinner-table it was clear that his portraits had not in the least exaggerated his natural picturesqueness. It was a noble, leonine head, a thing of power and virility, framed with a mane of white hair. His eyes were heavy-lidded, but deep-seeing and almost uncomfortably direct and penetrating in their gaze; yet where one might have expected calculation and cold detachment there was an impenetrable veil of kindliness which served to obscure the elemental forces which must have lurked beneath.

There were tomatoes among the *hors-d'œuvres*, and there were tomatoes in the soup. When the victor of Rodova made a significant departure from the custom of our land by smacking his lips and astonishing the impassive Parkins by sayin, "Make my compliments to de *chef* upon his *consommé;* I will haf more," his hostess hoisted the ensign of the rose, and her Royal Highness beamed upon her.

"There, Irene! what did I not tell you, my child?" she exclaimed triumphantly.

"Oliver has a devil of a twist upon him, evidently," murmured the son-in-law of Ferdinand the Twelfth, in an aside to his host of such deplorable banality that an apology is offered for its appearance in these pages. "I wish it would choke the old swine."

"On the contrary, he seems a quite kindly and paternal old gentleman."

"Ha, you don't know him!"

I admitted that I did not and that I looked forward to our better acquaintance.

The hostess and her humble coadjutor in the things of this life felt it to be a supreme moment in the progress of the feast when the royal lips were brought to the brink of the paternal madeira which had reached us so opportunely, if so illicitly, from Doughty Bridge, Yorks. But our suspense was resolved at once. The victor of Rodova raised his glass to his hostess with the most benignant glance in the world, and for the second time Mrs. Arbuthnot hoisted the ensign of the rose.

Certainly the royal expansion had a charm that was

all its own. Being called for the first time to my present exalted plane of social intercourse, I had had no opportunity of observing anything quite like it, other than in the manners of Fitz and his wife which had proved such a scandal to our neighbourhood. But the victor of Rodova was so spontaneous in his actions and so unstudied in his gestures, and he appeared to wear his heart on his sleeve with such a childlike facility, that to one nurtured in our insular mode of self-repression it was as good as a play to be in his company.

One thing was clear. From the first it was plain that Mrs. Arbuthnot had achieved a great personal triumph. And in the particular circumstances of the case I am constrained to append the courtier-like phrase, "nor was it to be wondered at." Speaking out of a moderately full knowledge of the subject in all its chameleon-like range of vicissitude, from grave to gay, from lively to severe, in gowns by Worth, in frocks by Paquin, in costumes by Redfern, in nondescript creations by "the woman who makes things for Mama," I had never seen the subject in question keyed up to quite this degree of allure. Mrs. Arbuthnot was magnificent.

The King beamed upon her and she beamed upon the King. More than once he pledged her in the paternal madeira; and before the modest feast had run its course Fitz gave me a stealthy kick on the shin.

"Tell her to keep her door locked to-night," he said in one of his sinister asides.

The bluntness of the words was most uncomfortable, but there was no reason to doubt their sincerity. It was a piece of advice at which one so incorrigibly *bour-*

geois as its recipient might have taken offence. That he did not do so should be counted to him, upon due reflection, as the expression of some remote strain of a more azure tint!

"I know the King's majesty only too well," said the son-in-law of Ferdinand the Twelfth.

When the ladies had left us, the King talked in the friendliest manner and always with that engaging simplicity that was so unstudied and so charming. He was curious to know what I had done to my arm, and when I told him he inquired minutely as to the nature of the wound, and gave me advice as to its treatment. This piece of consideration recalled the magazine article I had lately studied. Here seemed a practical illustration of the fact that in a literal sense he was the father of his people.

"You must shew it to me to-morrow," he said. "And I will give you some ointment I always carry, made by my own chemist to my own prescription. Schalk laughs at my chemistry, but that's because he's jealous. I will apply it for you, and in three days you will see the difference. What are you laughing at, Schalk?"

"A man may laugh at his thoughts, sir, may he not?" said Schalk, with a dour smile.

"Not in the presence of the little father, Schalk, unless he shares them with the little father. What are you laughing at? But there, since you bungled that treaty with the wily Teuton your thoughts are not of much consequence. You know I don't care a doit for your thoughts, Schalk, since you went to Berlin. The thoughts of Schalk, forsooth! The wine is with you,

you rascal. Remember that in England it is not considered to be good breeding to get drunk before your King."

"In Illyria, sir, that is always held to be impossible," said Schalk.

Ferdinand the Twelfth indulged in a guffaw.

"Good for you, impious one! Nay, fill up your glass before you pass it, and keep out your long nose, else our English friends will think we have no manners in Illyria."

When it pleases a monarch to unbend, the laughter his sallies evoke may seem overmuch for his wit. But it is an excellent custom to laugh heartily at the humour of kings. Ferdinand the Twelfth, in spite of his long journey, was in a very gracious mood and indulged us with many sallies at the expense of his Chancellor. Baron von Schalk, however, was well able to defend himself. It must be allowed, I think, that the royal wit was neither very refined nor very courteous. Rough and primitive, it had something of a Gargantuan savour. But his own deep-voiced appreciation of it was a perpetual feast. He also told one or two stories of a true Rabelaisian cast. They were told with an immense gusto, and he led the laughter himself with a wholeheartedness which was quite Homeric. Before the bottle the victor of Rodova was magnificent company. It was impossible not to respond to his unaffected, if extremely catholic, good-humour.

When we joined the ladies we found them playing a game of patience. The Father of his People immediately carried a chair to the side of Mrs. Arbuthnot,

sat beside her and offered pertinent help in the arrangement of her cards.

"But this game is only fit for people like Schalk," he declared. "Britch is the game we play in Illyria."

Interpreting such a remark as being in the nature of a command, the hostess swept her cards together, and imperiously ordered her spouse to get the bridge markers.

"How shall we play, sir?" said Mrs. Arbuthnot.

"Togezzer, madame, you and I," said the King, with an air of homage, "*if* you please. I can see you play well."

"Oh, sir!" said Madame, for the third time hoisting the ensign of the rose. "How can you possibly know that?"

"Infallible signs, milady," said the King, laughing. "Trust an old soldier to read the signs. First, your ears, if I may say so. They have shape and position, just like my own. That means a well-balanced mind. And that dainty head, *c'est magnifique!* What intellect behind that forehead! Now give me your hand—the left one."

Milady gave the King a much bejewelled paw.

"Ouf!" said he, "what ambition! You will never hesitate to call *sans atout.* The heart-line is very good, also. There will be no other partner for Ferdinand. Schalk can have whom he pleases."

It pleased Baron von Schalk to choose her Royal Highness, and a very interesting game began.

"We must take care, milady," said Ferdinand the Twelfth, "we simple children of nature. I expect they

will cheat us horribly. Schalk has very little in the way of a conscience, and nothing delights Sonia so much as to overreach a confiding parent."

As he spoke it pleased this simple child of nature to revoke in a very flagrant and palpable manner.

"No diamonds, partner?" said Mrs. Arbuthnot.

"None whatever," said the King blandly. "I think a small deuce will take that trick, eh, Schalk?"

"So it appears, sir," said the long-suffering Chancellor.

I was led aside by the son-in-law of Ferdinand the Twelfth.

"If you watch this game, old son," said he, "you will gain an insight into the monarchical basis of the constitution of Illyria. Let us watch what the plausible old ruffian does with the nine of diamonds."

Happily the game was not being played for money. But it was characteristic of the Illyrian ruler, that in even the simple matter of a game of cards he was incapable of conducting it other than in a manner peculiarly his own.

CHAPTER XXV

THE FATHER OF HIS PEOPLE

It was past two o'clock when the *partie* was dissolved. No sooner had our guests retired to their repose than Mrs. Arbuthnot turned enthusiastically to her lord.

"What a perfectly lovely old man! Such charm, such distinction; so kind, so unaffected, and oh, so simple! There is something in being a king, after all."

"Things are not always what they seem, *mon enfant*," I remarked uneasily.

"He is a perfect old darling."

"He is one of the deepest men in Europe, as all the world knows."

"He is a dear."

"Personally, I have no wish to meet him in a lonely lane on a dark night, if I should happen to have anything upon me that I cared to lose."

"Why, goose, you are jealous!"

"Put not your trust in princes, my child." And reluctantly enough, I confided Fitz's piece of advice.

Howbeit I was more than half prepared for Mrs. Arbuthnot's queenlike indignation.

"What do you mean, Odo?" said she majestically. The outraged delicacy of a De Vere Vane-Anstruther is a very majestic thing.

"Either you promise, or I don't sleep over the stables."

"This is all the doing of Fitz! He has an insane prejudice."

"Fitz is a very shrewd fellow, and he knows our guest rather better than either of us. You must not forget that kings are kings in Illyria."

"I don't understand."

"You must promise, even if you don't."

"I shall do nothing of the kind. It is a humiliating suggestion. Besides, it is all so *bourgeois*."

"I was waiting for that. But whatever it is, I have quite made up my mind. Either you promise, or I don't sleep over the stables."

"Then I refuse; absolutely and unconditionally I refuse," said Mrs. Arbuthnot, with what can only be described as *hauteur*.

It was our first *impassé* in the course of six years of double harness. I have never disguised from myself that I am a weak mortal. Mrs. Arbuthnot has never disguised it from me either. The habit of yielding more or less gracefully to the imperious will of the superior half of my entity had become second nature. But there was a voice within that would not have me give way.

"Absolutely and unconditionally! I consider it odious. And why you should insult me in this manner——"

The star of my destiny was rising to the heights of the tragedy queen.

"If you would only make the effort to understand,

my child," I said patiently, "what is implied in your own admission that there is something in being a king, after all!"

"You are insanely jealous. He is a perfect dear, and he is old enough to be one's grandfather."

For once, however, I was adamant. Together we ascended the stairs; together we entered her ladyship's chamber. There was not adequate accommodation for the two of us. The best rooms had been placed at the disposal of Fitz and his wife, and of the King and his Chancellor. Leading out of this apartment, however, was a small dressing-room with a sofa in it. I opened the door and, as I did so, delivered my final ultimatum.

"Irene, you will either do as you are asked, else I spend the rest of the night in there."

"Pray do as you choose," Mrs. Arbuthnot was pale with indignation. "But I shall not lock the door."

"So be it."

Leaving the door of the dressing-room slightly ajar, I lay down on the sofa just as I was, and composed myself for slumber as well as an entirely ridiculous situation would permit. Precisely how it had come about it was hard to determine, but I was prepared to inflict upon my overwrought self, for the events of that long day had been many and remarkable, a still further amount of bodily discomfort. But Fitz's hint had overthrown a married man, a father of a family and a county member, whatever the sense of humour had to say about it all.

In the process of time I forgot sufficiently the dull tumult of my brain and the throbbing of my arm for

my jaded nerves to be lulled into an uneasy doze. How long I had been oblivious of my surroundings I do not know, but quite suddenly a cry seemed to break in upon my senses. I awoke with a start.

The room was in total darkness save for a thread of light which came through the partially open door of the adjoining chamber. But sounds and a voice proceeded from it.

I rose from my sofa and listened at the threshold.

"Little milady. Little Irene."

The pleading accents were familiar, and paternal.

I pushed open the door and entered the room. A distracted vision with streaming hair and in a white night-gown was sitting up in bed; while candle in hand a magnificent figure in a blue silk Oriental robe over a brilliant yellow sleeping-suit was confronting her.

"Little milady. Little Irene."

I fumbled for the knob of the electric light, found it and turned it up.

I was face to face with a subtle and smiling visage. There was astonishment in it, it was true, but it was also full of humour and benevolence.

"Why, my friend," said Ferdinand the Twelfth in his most paternal manner, "pray what are *you* doing here?"

I confess that I could find no answer to the royal inquiry.

In the circumstances it was not easy to know what reply to make. Indeed so completely was I taken aback that I could not find a word to say. Coolly enough the King stood regarding me with that bland and subtle

countenance. But as those smiling eyes measured me they gave me "to think." I carried one arm in a sling, I was without a weapon, and the Father of his People was a man of exceptional physical power.

As a measure of precaution, I reached pensively for the poker.

A transitory gleam flitted across the King's face, but the royal countenance was still urbane.

"Madame should have locked her door," he said, with an air of humorous reproach. "Dat is a good custom we haf in Illyria."

"Your Majesty must forgive us," said I without permitting my glance to stray towards the half-terrified vision that was so near to me, "if we appear *bourgeois*. The fact is we are not so familiar as we should like to be with the usages of the great world."

The King laughed heartily.

"There is nothing to forgive, my good friend," he said with an air of splendid magnanimity. "But Madame should certainly have locked her door. However, let us not bear malice."

With a superbly graceful gesture, in which the paternal and the humorous were delightfully commingled, the King withdrew.

Horror and incredulity contended in the eyes of Mrs. Arbuthnot. But I did not think well to spare her the reverberation of my triumph.

"There is something in being a king, after all, *mon enfant*."

Mrs. Arbuthnot was only able to gasp.

"Do not let us blame him; he is the Father of his

People. But apparently it would seem that that which may be *bourgeois* in the eyes of the matrons of the Crackanthorpe Hunt is really the highest breeding in Illyria."

Thereupon I laid down the poker as pensively as I had taken it up, sought to compose the star of my destiny, who was beginning to weep softly, and bade her good morning.

Outside the door I lingered a moment to hear the key click in the lock in the most unmistakable manner.

With the aid of a candle I made my way to my temporary quarters over the stables. The hour was a quarter to five. Little time was left for further repose, but it was used to such advantage that it was not without difficulty that my servant was able to rouse me at a quarter to eight. By the time I was putting the finishing touches to my toilet I was informed that Count Zhygny was below, inspecting the horses.

Count Zhygny, to give our illustrious guest his *nom de guerre*, which, like nearly all Illyrian proper names, it is well not to attempt to pronounce as it is spelt, was stroking the fetlocks of Daydream with an air of knowingness when I joined him. Dressed in a suit of tweeds and a green felt hat, he looked the picture of restless energy. Seen in the light of day he was far older than he had appeared the previous night. Hollows were revealed in his cheeks, and there were pouches under his eyes. His hands shook and his brow had many lines, but every one of his many inches was instinct with a natural force.

His greeting was frank and hearty and as cordial as

you please. There was not a trace of resentment or embarrassment. But, from the manly ease of his bearing, it was abundantly clear that the king could do no wrong.

He linked his arm through mine, and together we strolled in to breakfast. At the sideboard I helped him to bacon and tomatoes, and Mrs. Arbuthnot gave him coffee.

The manner of "little milady" was perhaps a thought constrained when she received his Majesty's matutinal greeting. To encourage her he pinched her ear playfully.

Mrs. Fitz did not grace this movable feast, and Fitz and the Chancellor were rather late.

"You have taken a long time over your devotions, Schalk," said the King. "I am glad it does not cost me these pains to keep on good terms with heaven."

"I also, sir," said Schalk drily.

"I see you have the English *Times* there, Schalk. What is the news this morning?"

The Chancellor adjusted a pair of gold pince-nez and began to read aloud from that organ of opinion.

"Blaenau, Wednesday morning. The Illyrian Land Bill was read a second time in the House of Deputies this afternoon."

"Ha, that is important," said the King, laughing. "What a well-informed journal is the English *Times!* Do you approve of the Illyrian Land Bill, Schalk?"

"Since I had the honour of drafting it, sir, to your dictation, I cannot do less than endorse it."

"And read a second time already, says the English

Times, in the House of Deputies. I always say they have some of the best minds of the Kingdom in the Lower House."

"Trust them to know what is good for themselves," said Schalk sourly.

It was tolerably clear, from the Chancellor's manner, that his royal master was enjoying a little private baiting.

"Why, Schalk," he said, "I believe you are still harping on Clause Three."

"I have never reverted, sir, from my original view," said the Chancellor, "that under Clause Three the peasantry is getting far more than is good for it. I have always felt, sir, as you are aware, that this is a concession to the pestilential agrarian agitator, and I feel sure the First Chamber will proclaim this opinion also."

"Well, well, Schalk," said the King cheerfully, "is it not the function of the First Chamber to disagree with the Second, and what is the Little Father for except to soothe their quarrels by flattering both and agreeing with neither?"

"Your Majesty is pleased to speak in riddles," said the Chancellor with gravity.

"What a cardinal you would have made, Schalk!" said his master. "But if you have really made up your mind about Clause Three, we must look at it again. I agree with you that it is not good for growing children to eat all the cake. We must keep a little for their elders, because they like cake too, it appears."

"Everyone is fond of cake," said the Chancellor

sententiously, "but there is never quite enough to go round, unfortunately."

"That is a happy phrase of Schalk's," said the King, making the conversation general with his amused air; "'the pestilential agrarian agitator.' Have you that kind of animal in England?"

"We are infested with him, sir," said the member for the Uppingdon Division of Middleshire, the owner of a modest thousand or so of acres. "The people for the land, and the land for the people! The country reeks of it."

"It is the same everywhere," said the King. "A great world movement is upon us. The wise can detect the voice of the future in the cry of the people, but there are some people who stuff wool in their ears, eh, Schalk?"

Ferdinand the Twelfth assumed a sort of indulgent sagacity. This half-serious, half-bantering fragment of his discourse and half-a-dozen to a similar tenor to which it was my privilege to listen, seemed to establish one fact clearly. It was that the King was not the slave of his ministers. He was a man with a keen outlook upon his time, deliberately unprogressive, not in response to the reactionary forces by which he was surrounded, but because he held that it was not good for the world to go too fast.

His article of faith was simple enough, and in his conduct he did not hesitate to embody it. He conceived it to be the highest good for every people to have a king; a wise, patient and beneficent law-giver to correct

the excess of faction; one to stand at the helm to steer the ship of state through troubled waters.

Whether his conception of the monarchical condition was right or wrong, he was able to enforce it with all the weight of his personality. He believed profoundly in the divine right. In the assurance of his own infallibility he seemed to admit no limit to his own freedom of action.

He believed that the future of his country was in his hands. It was in order to conserve it that he had come to England in this singular and unexpected manner. Having chosen a Royal Consort for his only daughter, she whose act of revolt was but a manifestation of sovereignty carried to a higher power, he was prepared come what may to enforce his will.

All through this little history I have tried to show how comedy strove with tragedy as the play was unfolded. The spectators were never quite sure which way the cat would jump. Infinite opportunity for laughter was provided, but underneath this merriment lay that which was too deep for tears. Viewed upon the surface, the precipitation into our midst of such an elemental figure as Ferdinand the Twelfth was food for an inextinguishable jest, but the reverse of the medal must not be overlooked.

Every hour the King spent under our roof was a slow-drawn torture for Fitz and his wife. Holding the romantic belief that they were twin-souls whom destiny had linked irrevocably together they were everything to one another. But running counter to it were those incalculable hereditary forces which the King with in-

comparable power and address was marshalling against it.

Now was the time for the Princess to yield. In his own person the King had come to demand of her that once and for all she should take up the burden of her heritage. If now she declined to heed, the days of the Monarchy were numbered.

It was only too clear to us onlookers that a terrible contest was being waged. In two or three brief days the Princess seemed worn to a shadow; the look of wildness was again in her eyes; her whole bearing confessed an overwhelming mental stress.

Fitz also suffered greatly. And his travail was not rendered less by the fact that Ferdinand did not scruple to make a personal appeal.

About the third night of this ordeal, Fitz accompanied me to my quarters over the stables.

"Arbuthnot," he said, sinking into a chair, "I have been thinking this thing out as well as I can with the help of Ferdinand, and he has made me see that my rights in the matter are not quite what I thought they were. I do not complain. He has talked to me as a father might to a son, and he has brought me to see that our position in the sight of God may not be quite what we judged it to be."

I was hardly prepared for such a speech on the lips of Fitz. That it should fall from them so simply gave me an enlarged idea of the forces that were being brought to bear upon him.

CHAPTER XXVI

A WALK IN THE GARDEN

In the last resort the issue lay with Sonia. Her husband had the wisdom to recognise that; although his own happiness was at stake, the matter was beyond the restricted sphere of the personal equation.

In the crisis of his fate it has always seemed to me that Fitz displayed the inherent nobility of his character. Once the King, with immense force and cogency, had revealed the situation in its true aspect, his son-in-law, without abating a single claim to his wife's consideration, yet refrained from unduly exercising the prerogative conferred upon him by their spiritual affinity.

It was wise and right that Fitz should detach himself as far as possible from the conflict that was being waged between father and daughter. But, although he did what lay in his power to simplify the issue, he could not banish the image of himself from his wife's heart. He furnished the motive power of her existence. Emotion held the master-key to her nature. In any conflict between love and duty, love could hardly fail to win.

Fitz suffered intensely as the struggle went on. He even threw out a hint to me that he might be tempted to take a certain step to help his wife to a possible solution of the problem.

"The longer this goes on," he said to me in the small hours of the morning, "the more clearly I realise that Sonia's place is with her own people. I have been blind, and I have been mad, and I owe it to Ferdinand that I have been able to see myself in my true relation to the issue in which fate has involved us. It is six years since I first saw Sonia on the terrace of the Castle at Blaenau. I was travelling about the world trying to find ease for my soul. I knew that she was unhappy, and she knew that I was, but we were young and not afraid. We met continually, for I gained the *entrée* to the Castle as the grandson of the Elector of Gracow, whose daughter married my grandfather, George Fitzwaren of tragic memory.

"We used to sit out on the Castle terrace, Sonia and I, night after night, watching the stars in their courses, while her father dragooned his parliament and hoodwinked his people. She was lonely, outcast and unloved; there was none to whom she could speak her thoughts; she was oppressed with the sense of her destiny.

"She said that when she first met me she wondered where she had seen me before. She said that my presence haunted her like a half-remembered vision, until it began to merge itself into her dreams of a former existence and a happier state. And as she said this, her voice grew strangely familiar. For me it unlocked the doors of memory. It was like the faint, far-off music you can hear sometimes, the music of the wind in winter sweeping across infinite, illimitable space.

"She allowed me to kiss her, and we knew then we

held the key to the riddle of existence. We were twin-souls made one again, and together we would go through all time and all eternity.

"But I think we are beginning now to realise that the sense of oneness is alien to the human state, and that the hour is at hand when we must separate and go out again into the night of ages alone."

In a condition of desolation the unhappy man rocked his meagre body to and fro as thus he spoke.

"If it will really help her," he said, "I think I shall put an end to my present life. At least, I shall ask Ferdinand to do it, for I doubt whether any man in the true enjoyment of his reason has really the power to do it for himself. And yet, perhaps one ought not to say that. So much can be done by prayer."

"Surely it is contrary to the will of God?" I said with a kind of horror.

"It is, undoubtedly," said Fitz, "as regards humanity at large. But it sometimes happens you know that one among us plays the game up so high that he gets a special decree. I almost think, Arbuthnot, that I have heard the Voice—and if I have, my unhappy Sonia will be able to go back to her people for a term, and I shall ask you, as my oldest friend, a man whom my instincts tell me to trust, to accept the charge of my little daughter."

To one poised delicately upon the plane of reason such a speech could not fail to be shocking. But it was so sincere, so reasoned, the holder of these views was so entirely the captain of his soul, that his words, as he uttered them, seemed to derive a kind of sanction

which as I commit them to paper they do not appear to possess.

The counsel of one man to another does not amount to much in those cases where the subject-matter of their discussion has been already referred to the High Court. But I felt that I should be unfaithful to the elements that formed my own nature, acutely conscious as I was of their imperfect development, if I did not seek to give them some sort of an expression at such a moment as this.

"Fitz," I said, "I can claim no right to address you, except as a younger brother. You belong to a higher order of beings; your life is more developed than mine, but I ask you in the name of God to refrain from the step you contemplate, unless you are absolutely convinced, beyond any possibility of error, that there is no other way out."

The unhappy man made no reply. His face had begun to seem unrecognisable.

I rose involuntarily from the chair in which I sat.

"Let us walk in the garden," I said.

The suggestion appeared to shape itself on my lips, regardless of the will's volition. It was, perhaps, a recovered fragment of man's heritage floating downwards from the past.

I opened the door and we went downstairs into the garden. It was the middle of the night; what there was of the moon was almost wholly obscured; the air was mild with the purity of recent rain. Up and down the wet lawns we walked, bareheaded and in our slippered feet.

Suddenly lights flashed upon us out of the shrubbery.

"It is all right," I called. "Do not disturb us. Go into another part of the grounds."

The voice seemed unlike my own, but the watchers obeyed it.

Nature exhorted us as we walked in the garden. Her purity, her calm, the incommunicable magic of her spaciousness, the thrall of her splendour entered our veins. We were her children, flesh of her flesh, bone of her bone. The mighty Mother spoke to us.

A little wind moved softly among the gaunt branches of a pine.

"I must make quite sure that the Voice has spoken to me," said Fritz.

The unhappy man walked to the pine tree, knelt down and seemed involuntarily to shroud his face with his hands.

I shrank back and turned away.

Quite suddenly my heart leapt with surprise and dismay. An unexpected and sinister presence was by my side.

"I pity dat poor fellow," said a voice softly. "I pity dem both."

It was the voice of the King.

Habited in a voluminous mantle, the Victor of Rodova linked his arm through mine in his paternal manner.

"Come, my friend," he said in a voice of urgent kindliness, "let us walk in the garden."

Together we walked over the lawns, the King and I, with slow and measured steps.

"It is a beautiful night"—Ferdinand the Twelfth took off his hat.

"God is in His heaven, sir," I said softly.

"You are a God-fearing people," said the King; "that is a good thing. What can we do in the world without the fear of God? This night reminds me of the night before Rodova. It was just like this, a calm, soft air, a little moist. You could hear the wind creeping softly among the pine-trees. At the bottom of your garden there was the gentle noise of a little river. All night the little fishes were leaping and playing in its clear waters, and living their lives joyously as it seemed good to them. And beyond the river were the Austrians, sixty thousand men with horses and cannons.

"The God of Armies had given the soul of my country into my care. Was she to remain a free and independent people as she had been since the time of Alvan the First, or was she to be trampled under the heel of the oppressor? All night I walked in the garden, and I remember I knelt down under the pine-tree yonder, as our friend is doing there. It is a wonderful thing how history keeps happening over again."

The King's voice had grown hushed and solemn.

"To-night is another crisis in the history of our country. I am older than I seem; there is a voice within which tells me that my course is almost run. That is why I have come to speak with my daughter. It is the business of us Svelkes to hold the balance in the scales of destiny. Since the time of Alvan the First there has been an unbroken line of monarchy; perhaps it is decreed that it shall end to-night. But yet I cannot think

that. The unseen power which enabled us to withstand the might of Austria will invest my daughter with wisdom and grace."

There was a footfall on the soft turf, and we turned to find that Fitz had joined us.

"Ha! Nevil," said the King in a voice of paternal tenderness. "I was explaining to our good friend how this night reminds me of the eve of Rodova. Our lady the moon was in her present quarter; yonder was Mars, blood-red on the eastern horizon. There behind us was Jupiter, exactly as we see him to-night; but on the night of Rodova Uranus was not visible. It was a grave crisis in the history of our country; to-night is a grave crisis also, for I feel that a term has been placed to my days. But I walked all night in the garden, and I knelt down beneath a single pine-tree, and the God of Armies spoke to me. 'Fear nothing,' said the God of Armies. 'At the break of day, cross the river that flows at the bottom of the garden, and all will be well.' "

The light of the moon fell upon the King's face. That smiling and subtle visage looked strangely luminous.

"An hour before daybreak," the King went on, "Parlowitz came to me. 'Weissmann has come up in the night,' he said, 'with twenty thousand men. If we cross the river, all is lost.' 'Fear nothing, Parlowitz,' I said. 'At daybreak we cross the river. The God of Armies would have it so.' 'Then, sire,' said Parlowitz, 'give this to my wife when next you see her'—Parlowitz unfastened the collar of his tunic and took off a locket

which he wore round his neck—'and tell her that it is my wish that our second son John should succeed to my estate.' I then bade adieu to Parlowitz, for he would have it so; and as the dawn was breaking he was shot through the breast at the head of his division. But that was a glorious day in the annals of the Illyrian people; and you, my dear Nevil, will have seen the noble statue that has been raised to the memory of Parlowitz on the terrace at Blaenau."

"I have seen the statue," said Fitz calmly. "A monument of piety, but abominable as a work of art."

"It is the work of the best sculptor in Illyria," said the King.

"There are no sculptors in Illyria," said Fitz bluntly.

The King fell into a muse. I was sensible of Fitz's grip upon my arm.

"It is wonderful," said the King softly, "how history continues to happen over again. I seem to hear the voice again in the upper air: 'At daybreak, cross the river at the bottom of the garden, and all will be well.'"

The grip upon my arm grew tighter.

"Do not leave me," said Fitz in a hoarse whisper.

All night long the three of us walked up and down the lawns before the house. In one of the upper windows was a light. It was Sonia's room.

Few words passed between us, and in the main it was the King who spoke. Never once did Fitz relax his grip upon my arm. Indeed, as the hours passed, it seemed to grow more tense. It had the convulsive tenacity of one who in the last extremity fights to keep the body united to the soul.

Even I, who make no claim to be highly sensitised, was susceptible of the ominous challenge of the force that was enfolding us. Silence was even more terrible than speech.

"For God's sake do not leave me!" said my unhappy friend in a whisper of terror.

At last the first faint pencillings of the dawn began to declare themselves in the upper air. My slippered feet were soaked and my teeth were chattering with the chill of the morning. A curious sensation, which I had never felt before, began to steal over me. With a thrill of suffocating, incommunicable horror I began slowly to realise that I was no longer the master of myself.

Fitz's convulsed grip was still upon my arm, but the sense of him had grown remote. He was slipping farther and farther away.

"Hold me!" he whispered; and again "hold me!" The stifled voice was like that of one in whose company I was drowning.

The voice of the King sounded quite near, although it was with dull stupefaction that I heard his words.

"The day is breaking. The river flows at the bottom of the garden."

The fingers of my friend no longer encircled my arm. In the half-light I saw the King produce a revolver from the folds of his mantle. He handed it to Fitz with a paternal, almost deprecating gesture, and we were both powerless to deny him. It seemed to me that I was standing outside all that was happening. The sense of distance appeared ever to increase.

I witnessed the King kiss the forehead of his son-in-

law, and heard him give him his blessing. Then I seemed to hear the voice of Fitz crying piteously:

"Sonia, Sonia, help me!"

"Look over there," said the King; "the day is breaking. It is another glorious sunrise for the people of Illyria."

"Yes, indeed, sir," said a voice that broke the spell.

The prayer of Fitz had been heard. Sonia had come unperceived into our midst.

"I have come to taste the morning, it is so good," she said. "And you, how early you have risen!"

The King laughed. He seemed to enfold his daughter with that visage of smiling subtlety.

"We have been walking in the garden, my friends and I," he said. "We have had a pleasant talk together. The position of the stars reminded me of the eve of Rodova, except that Uranus was not with us. It is always well to know the position of Uranus."

I felt Fitz slip the revolver into my hand.

"Come," he said in his tone of natural decision, "let us go and have a bath and get ready for breakfast."

While the King continued to discourse amiably with his daughter we made our escape.

In the privacy of my room over the stables we removed the cartridges from the revolver.

Fitz handed the weapon to me.

"Keep it," said he, "as a memento of Ferdinand the Twelfth. I should have crossed the river if Sonia had not heard my call."

Fitz shivered; but in his haggard face I thought that reason and sanity were still enthroned.

CHAPTER XXVII

PROVIDES A LITTLE FEMININE DIVERSION

At the breakfast table, Mrs. Arbuthnot was moved to inquire of our distinguished guest whether he would care to meet some of our friends and neighbours at dinner. His incognito should be preserved rigidly; and perhaps a few fresh faces would serve to lighten the tedium of his stay in our midst. The King assented to the proposal with his usual hearty good-humour.

Personally I was deeply grateful to Mrs. Arbuthnot for having had the inspiration to make it. I was prepared to welcome anything that would withdraw me from the perilous altitudes upon which I had been walking throughout the night. I might be said to yearn for anything that could re-attach me to the humbler plane of men and things, in whose familiarity lay mental security.

After breakfast, however, when I came to discuss this apparently innocent proposal with Mrs. Arbuthnot, it was clear that something lurked behind it.

"I have got a little plan, you know," said she, with a plaintive childlike air. "They have all been so uppish with me lately that I have thought of a little plan of scoring them off properly."

"By asking them to meet royalty and giving them an excellent dinner?"

"There shall be nothing wrong with the dinner," said Mrs. Arbuthnot, "but it ought to be very amusing. I shall drive round to Mary's at once and ask her to forgive the short notice, but Sonia's father has unexpectedly turned up and, much against our will, we are having to entertain him."

"Where is the jest? The bald and painful truth is seldom amusing."

"Goose! As they are all convinced that Sonia was formerly a circus-rider in Vienna, what can be more natural than that her father is the proprietor of the circus?"

"True, madame. But how will you explain away his title?"

"It will be the simplest thing out. You can always buy a title in Illyria, like you can here. The old circus man has made a fortune and purchased a title accordingly."

I confessed that that had a fairly plausible sound.

"They will swallow it, see if they don't," said Mrs. Arbuthnot, giving an ever freer rein to her invention. "And the old circus man is really too funny, and if Mary Catesby and Laura Glendinning and George and the Vicar and Mrs. Vicar, and that pushing little American would like to see for themselves, we shall be very glad for them to dine here to-morrow evening. And," concluded Mrs. Arbuthnot in a tone in which childlike conviction and a natural love of mischief were excellently blended, "just see if they don't, that's all!"

"But why, my child? I confess that I cannot see any particular charm in such an entertainment."

"They will come, if only to score us off afterwards, you goose. You don't know them as well as I do."

I confessed that I did not.

Mrs. Arbuthnot lost no time in driving round to her friends and returned in high glee with them all in her net.

"What did I say!" she declaimed triumphantly. "I called first on Mary. I knew if I persuaded her, the rest would be easy. Well, you know her little way. She read me a terrible lecture about the duties of my position. As the wife of the member, my responsibilities were simply enormous. Not on any account would she sit down at the same table as Mrs. Fitz. But I drew such a fancy portrait of the old circus man and of his friend the ring-master, who was almost as funny as himself, that I got her to consent. So she and George are coming."

"Mischievous monkey!"

"Then I went on to the Vicarage. The Vicar had no engagement, but he hummed and hawed, until I told him Mary was coming, so he is coming too, and he is going to bring Lavinia. Then there will be Laura and the little American and Reggie Brasset, and Jodey, of course. We shall be quite a family party, and it ought to be tremendous fun."

"Won't Brasset and Jodey be rather flies in your ointment? Don't they know your guilty secret?"

"I shall tell them all about it, of course, and they will help us to carry it off. And I mean to ask Colonel

Coverdale to come too. He will like to meet the King, and we must persuade him not to give us away."

I was in no mood to give free play to whatever I may have in the way of a sense of humour. But Mrs. Arbuthnot's scheme, doubtful as it was on the score of morality, had at least the merit of diverting the current of my thoughts into another channel. It certainly did something to lessen the tension.

Mrs. Arbuthnot laid her plans with considerable precaution. She had a long and extremely animated conversation over the telephone with the Chief Constable. I could almost hear the great man growl and chuckle as she expounded her wicked design. But in the end he was unable to resist her and he was in her net as well. Jodey and Brasset, of course, were only too eager to lend a hand, and both agreed with her "that they all deserved to be scored off properly." Personally, the workings of the "scoring-off" process were a little too much for my enfeebled mental system, but I was informed peremptorily that I always was a dull dog.

Determined to leave nothing to chance, Mrs. Arbuthnot even went to the length of taking Fitz into her confidence.

"You know, Nevil," she said engagingly, "how they have behaved to Sonia and what they have said about her behind her back."

"What have they said?" Fitz's indifference bordered upon the sublime.

"Why, don't you know?" Mrs. Arbuthnot transfixed the Man of Destiny with starlike orbs. "Don't you know that when Laura Glendinning found out that

Sonia rides just as straight as she does and that she looks much smarter, it made her frightfully jealous?"

"Did it indeed!" grunted the Man of Destiny.

"And can you believe, Nevil," the starlike orbs grew ever rounder and more luminous, "she circulated the story that dear Sonia was a circus-rider from Vienna!"

"Oh, really!" Fitz concealed a yawn in a rather perfunctory manner.

"And what is more, she got everybody to believe it."

Fitz's boredom was dissembled with a smile of twelve horse power politeness.

"And so, to score them off," said Mrs. Arbuthnot, rising to pleasantly histrionic heights, "I have invited the ringleaders to dinner to-night to meet the circus-rider's father, the proprietor of the circus, who has made a fortune out of his show and has bought himself a title, as, of course, you can in Illyria. And Baron von Schalk is the ring-master of his circus."

The Man of Destiny guffawed with languid inefficiency and declared that the plot was like a comic opera. In my private ear he recorded an opinion subsequently to which it would be hardly kind to give publicity.

"Nobody but a woman would have thought of it," he said. "If it turns out to be funny, so be it, but I must say it looks like spoiling a good meal—you've got a tophole cook, old son—and making things damned uncomfortable for everybody."

I adjured Fitz, who, like myself, was evidently in no mood to appreciate refined humour, to wait and see.

Lieutenant-Colonel John Chalmers Coverdale, C.M.G.,

late of his Majesty's Carabineers, was the first to arrive.

"Sailing rather near the wind, aren't you?" was his greeting to his hostess, who in her best gown was a ravishing example of picturesque demureness.

"I think it will go all right," said she. "Mary Catesby and George will be too killing."

Certainly, when that august matron arrived she was very *grande dame* and honest George five feet three inches of meticulous good breeding. They greeted Fitz and his wife with a distant reverence. Ferdinand the Twelfth and his famous minister had not yet appeared upon the scene. Most of their day had been spent upon the much-debated Clause Three of the Illyrian Land Bill.

Eight o'clock is the hour at which we dine in the Crackanthorpe country. It is the established custom for regular followers of that distinguished pack to be extremely hungry at that hour. As the presentation time-piece chimed the hour from the drawing-room chimney-piece, there was a full muster of Mrs. Arbuthnot's dinner guests: the Vicar and his wife, looking rather pinched and formal, their invariable attitude towards public life, yet the Vicar wearing a somewhat worldly pair of shoes of patent leather and equally worldly mauve socks and rather short trousers; Miss Laura Glendinning, our local Diana, who looked horse and talked horse and who would doubtless have eaten horse had it been in the menu; my charming little friend, the relict of Josiah P. Perkins of Brownville, Mass.; the noble Master enveloped in a sartorial master-

piece and a frown of perplexity; his *aide-de-camp*, Joseph Jocelyn De Vere Vane-Anstruther, enveloped ditto, but leaning up not ungracefully against a corner of the chimney-piece with his hands in his pockets, not looking at anybody, not speaking to anybody, but with a covert gaze fixed upon the drawing-room door in quest of early information in regard to Ferdinand the Twelfth.

In the middle of the *salon* the august Mrs. Catesby discussed the Minority Report with the vicar of the parish and Prison Reform with the Chief Constable, whilst I, sharing the largest and most comfortable sofa with Mrs. Nevil Fitzwaren, had to answer a succession of sympathetic inquiries in regard to my arm.

"A mere scratch," everybody was assured. "Lucky it wasn't worse. Fact is, those taxis are rather dangerous."

The presentation time-piece chimed a quarter past eight. The proprietor of the Viennese circus and his faithful acolyte were yet to seek. Romantic figures as they doubtless were—at least, there was the authority of the hostess that such was their nature—the manner in which they were obstructing the serious business of life was hard to condone.

Little Mrs. Josiah P. Perkins came up to our sofa. She gave a demure, down-looking glance at the fair *equestrienne* seated by my side, who was decidedly *piano*, which of course was as it should be, and made the plaintive confession, "I am so hungry. I wouldn't mind the hind leg off that satinwood table."

"You have full permission to have it," said I.

"Oh, no," said Mrs. Josiah P. Perkins, "it would spoil the suite. But hardly any breakfast, a sandwich at the Top Covert, in which there was hardly any hog, one cup of tea at the Vicarage, and you know what that is, and now—oh dear!——"

In these harrowing circumstances I conceived it to be my duty to find out what was toward. I yielded my place to Mrs. Josiah P. Perkins, and as she collapsed into it, I heard her say, "I suppose if you once get a cinch on circuses you make a regular pile right soon?"

But as I made to go forth in search of Ferdinand the Twelfth, lo and behold! that monarch came in with his minister. He was wearing no orders, there was nothing to enhance or to distort his personality, but it struck me that his bearing had a simple majesty beyond that of any person I had ever seen.

"Make our apologies, milady," he said in a low voice, which was yet quite audible to most in the room, since upon his entrance the conversation had been suspended automatically. "That mad Dutchman is waving his torch over the powder keg, and we had forgotten the time."

And then, with the greatest simplicity and good-nature, he started to make a tour of the room, shaking each man by the hand heartily, saying "Very pleased to meet you, sir," and bowing to each lady in turn with smiling gravity. He then gave the hostess his arm.

At the table I had Mrs. Catesby on my right hand, Mrs. Josiah P. Perkins on my left.

"What a lovely man!" said Charybdis on the left.

"I don't believe," said Scylla, "that he has any connection with a circus whatever."

"He is Mrs. Fitz's father, anyhow."

"What is his name?"

"Count Zhygny, but titles are cheap in Illyria."

"It is a noble head," said the great lady.

"Objective criticism is proverbially unsafe," I hazarded. "His daughter has a noble face."

"He is just bully," Charybdis was waxing enthusiastic. "Quite Bawston."

The great lady addressed herself in grim earnest to the serious business of life, and I am bound to say—although doubtless I am the wrong person to insist on the fact—that it was worthy of all the attention that was paid to it. We were twenty-five minutes late at the post, as Jodey had complained bitterly to his hostess, but the distinguished chef lately in the service of a nobleman had fairly excelled himself. Good-humour, nay, even cordiality, reigned all along the line.

"Are those pearls real?" said an imperious whisper from the right.

"I am not a judge of precious stones," I admitted, "although in the process of time I think I shall be."

"One can't believe they are real. If they are, they must be priceless. What a wonderful head that man has! And who, pray, is the other?"

"Herr Brouss is his name. The circus-ring is his vocation."

"I once met a distinguished foreigner, a Baron Somebody, a great politician who looked exactly like that. It was at Spa or one of those foreign watering-places.

By the way, Odo, what did the other man mean by 'the mad Dutchman is waving his torch over the powder-keg'? I see in the paper this morning that relations are strained between Germany and Illyria."

"It is one of those cryptic phrases to which we have not the key."

"What a delicious *entrée!* This is coals of fire with a vengeance. I hope you are not living beyond your means."

"Try the madeira—I see our excellent Vicar has discovered it. I am wondering, Mary, whether I could win a little support again in high places, as an out-and-out opponent of socialism in any shape or form."

"I will make no rash promises, Odo"—the great lady took a wary sip of the paternal vintage—"but I will speak to dear Evelyn if you wish, although you certainly don't deserve to be forgiven."

"I hope you will assure her that no one has a profounder veneration for a poor but deserving class."

In spite of the fact that Fitz and his wife remained silent and preoccupied, the progress of the feast was marked by a temperate gaiety. The hostess was on the crest of the wave. She made no attempt to veil an almost indecent sense of triumph. Precisely why she should have harboured it I cannot say, but she betrayed all the outward and visible signs of that emotion. There was a light in her eye, there was a piquancy about her discourse, there was a deferential archness in her attitude towards the high personages by whom she was surrounded, which communicated themselves to the

whole table. In response to her sallies the reverberations of the royal laughter were loud and long.

"Toppin' good sort, ain't he?" said my relation by marriage in a moment of expansion to Miss Laura Glendinning.

"Who is a toppin' good sort?" said that literal Diana.

"Why, the King, of course."

"I have never met him," said Diana.

"Where, pray, *did* you meet him, Joseph?" was the severe inquiry of the Great Lady over the brim of her madeira.

"In the paddock at Newmarket," said the young fellow, making a brilliant recovery.

"Fathead!" said the noble Master in a whisper of indulgent languor. "You nearly blewed it then."

The royal laughter continued to reverberate.

"I suppose he began life as a clown?" said the Great Lady.

"Nearly all these circus chaps do, don't they?" said Jodey, who nearly suffered misfortune in a too strenuous desire to preserve his gravity.

"Or as a bare-back rider," said I, taking up the parable.

"One would certainly say a clown," said the Great Lady. "Dear me, what manners!"

The port wine had appeared and had been duly dispensed. At this precise moment Ferdinand the Twelfth was giving the table-cloth a peremptory tap. He rose, glass in hand.

"Ladies and gentlemen, my good friends," said he,

"I haf one toast to propose. We will drink, if you please, to the health of *le bon roi Edouard.* God bless him!"

Upon the Chief Constable's extremely prompt initiative the company did not hesitate to follow the Circus Proprietor's lead.

"The King! God bless him!"

This incident, which the Circus Proprietor had invested with such authority that it seemed perfectly in order, nearly led to the undoing of Jodey and his noble friend. Overborne by the emotion of the moment, they indulged in a little side show of their own. The toast of *le bon roi Edouard,* having been honoured in form, the rest of the company sat down at once, but our two sportsmen remained upon their feet. Filling up their glasses, they turned towards the illustrious guest and repeated the solemn formula:

"The King! God bless him!"

"Sit down, you asses," said the Chief Constable in a truculent undertone.

Nevertheless, the proprietor of the circus bowed to them and smiled paternally.

"One shouldn't look for too much," said the Vicar, "but I think the old fellow is a bit of a sportsman."

"Not at all a bad fellow," said honest George expansively. "Not at all a bad fellow. Not at all a bad fellow."

However, a subtle fear lay within the breast of a married man, a father of a family and a county member, lest our excellent Vicar had spoken in excess of his knowledge. I foresaw that the ordeal by fire was com-

ing. When the ladies left the room desperation urged me to bestow a pointed hint upon the Church.

"Perhaps, Vicar," I said plaintively, "if you joined the ladies? Not at all a bad fellow, you know, not at all a bad fellow, but perhaps not—er—altogether—don't you know!"

"None the worse for that," said the hardest riding parson in three counties, filling up his glass with composure and with cordiality. "If you think the old buffer can appreciate a yarn, I will tell that old one of my uncle Jackson's. It is rather a chestnut these days, but perhaps he mayn't have heard it."

The clerical effort was by no means *vieux jeu*. And it is only just to the Church to mention that the style of the raconteur compared very favourably with that he affected in his vocation. Ferdinand the Twelfth guffawed heartily, and replied with a couple of masterpieces that brought the blush of shame to the cheek of modesty. I am afraid there was only one cheek, however, in which the emblem in question was able to find sanctuary, and truth compels me to assert that it was neither that of the Church nor the Police.

For nearly an hour by the clock the bottle was circulated and we were royally entertained. Ferdinand had had a rich and various experience of life. Much had he seen and done; he had made and unmade history; he was of the world, he loved it and he courted it; no personality had emerged upon the European chequerboard during the past half-century of whom he could not discourse out of a full and intimate knowledge. If it pleased him, he could pull aside the curtain and dis-

close the showman making the puppets dance in the political theatre.

He spoke with immense gusto; his zest of life was magnificent, and somewhat strangely there was nothing cynical or ignoble about his point of view. For the best part of an hour he held the least wise of us in thrall. He had an abundance, an overplus of nature, and subtle and Jesuitical—for want of a happier word—as he doubtless was, there was something humane and great-hearted about him as a man.

He gave away the great ones of the earth, showing them in their habit as they dwelt. He made them neither less nor more than they were. Naught was set down in malice, but his anecdotes mostly had a Rabelaisian tang which sprang from a prodigality of nature. He was a great and not unbeneficent force who drained the cup of life to the lees, smacked his lips heartily, and demanded more. His philosophy seemed to be to fear God but not to scruple to use to the full all the noble and infinite gifts of your inheritance. His rule of conduct, however, was not to measure men by their strength but by their weakness. "Every man has his blind spot," he said, apropos of Bismarck. "Find it and he is yours."

Such a crowded hour of wisdom, wit and historic revelation was an experience that even a dullard was not likely to forget. George Catesby and the Vicar alone were unacquainted with the identity of our guest, and as far as they were concerned the cat was more or less out of the bag.

When we joined the ladies we found that card-tables

had been set out. Mrs. Arbuthnot and Coverdale engaged Mrs. Catesby and the King. No one watching the play could fail to be amused by the Circus Proprietor's caustic but good-humoured reflections upon the performance of his partner. The great lady bore it all, however, with a stoical humility. To my surprise, she cut in for a second rubber, and her demeanour made it clear to Jodey, who disdained games like "*britch*" and preferred to watch the royal *partie*, "that she smelt a rat."

"I expect the show has pretty well given itself away by now," he said in an aside to his host, "but anyhow they have been scored off properly."

The mystery of "scoring off" was still too much for my inadequate mental processes. But I gathered that there was a consensus of opinion among persons of a more vivid intellectual cast that such indeed was the case.

"We shan't half pull her leg, I don't think"—in the exuberance of the hour the young fellow relapsed into a semi-lyrical music-hall comedy vein—"about the old circus johnny who drank a health unto his Majesty. I only wish old Alec had been here, that's all."

"A digger, madame, a digger," said the Circus Proprietor in a tone of humourous expostulation "when you haf not a treek!"

The Great Lady accepted the reproof with Christian meekness.

It was not until hard upon midnight that the departing guest was sped in divers chariots; the Church in the identical "one-hoss shay" of inimitable and pious

memory. "So many thanks, Mrs. Arbuthnot, for a really *memorable* evening," said the Church, with a wave of a somewhat unclerical bowler.

Plutocracy in the little person of Mrs. Josiah P. Perkins had a Daimler of sixty horse-power. She gave a lift to a less fortunate sister in the person of Miss Laura Glendinning. The Great Lady and the excellent George, "a good vintage sound but dull," as I have heard him described by a friend and neighbour, had recourse to a medium of travel of twelve horse-power only, as became the representatives of our sorely impoverished land-owning class.

"*Such* a success, my dear!" said the Great Lady, bestowing her parting blessing. "But," in a voice of mystery, "I shall *insist* upon the whole thing being cleared up."

CHAPTER XXVIII

THE WRITING ON THE WALL

The morning which followed these tempered gaieties was cold and bright. The King borrowed my nicest gun and, accompanied by his son-in-law, our retainer Andrew and an old field spaniel who answered to the name of Gyp, proceeded to put up a hare or two in the stubble of the home pasture. My physical state precluded my raising a gun to my shoulder, but I deemed it wise to be of the party. Accidents have been known to occur, and—but perhaps it is well not to pursue this vein of speculation.

Destiny is a vague term which provides the veil of decency for many secrets, and firearms have often been the chosen instruments of its decrees. Doubtless I was growing too imaginative. Certainly the adventures I had undergone during the past few weeks had left a mark upon my nerves, but when I recalled our vigil, which was still so fresh in my thoughts as to seem strange and terrible, I could not view the prospect of Ferdinand the Twelfth and his dutiful son-in-law sharing the innocent pastime of a little rough shooting without a secret fear.

I am glad to say that the course of the morning's sport lent no colour to this apprehension. The King

was an excellent shot, and even a strange gun made little difference to his prowess. He displayed both science and accuracy. But to see him standing cheek by jowl with Fitz, each with a cocked weapon in his hand; to watch them scramble through gaps and over stiles and five-barred gates, for in spite of his years and his physique Ferdinand was a wonderfully active man who took an almost boyish pride in his bodily condition, was to feel that the life of either was hanging by a thread.

However, as I have said, all this was the unworthy fruit of an overwrought imagination. The sportsmen returned to luncheon safe and sound, with a modest bag of the fowls of the air and the beasts of the field.

In the afternoon at the instance of Mrs. Arbuthnot, whose happy thought it was, we all motored over to inspect the Castle. The Family was understood to be in Egypt and the ducal stronghold is the show place of the district.

The rumour as to the Family's whereabouts proved to be correct, and a profitable hour was spent in the casual study of magnificence. The King took a genuine interest in all that he saw. In particular he was charmed with the view from the terrace, which is modelled upon Versailles, with a long and far-spreading vista of oaks and beeches and a herd of deer in the foreground.

He expressed a keen appreciation of the Duke's collection of works of art; yet he permitted himself to wonder that a private individual should have such pictures, such tapestries, such furniture, such porcelain,

such armour, such metal work, such carpets, such painted ceilings and heaven knows what besides.

"It is pretty well for a subject," said Ferdinand the Twelfth.

"His Grace of Dumbarton, sir," said I, "owns four other places in these islands on a similar scale of magnificence; he owns a million and a quarter acres, of which a portion is in great centres of industry, his income is rather more than £500,000 a year, and he is accustomed in his public utterances to describe himself as a member of a poor but deserving class."

Ferdinand the Twelfth pondered a moment with an amused yet wary smile.

"If he lived in Illyria," he said, "I think his grace would have to be content with less, eh, Schalk?"

"It would not surprise me, sir," said the Chancellor, with an expressive shrug. "I confess it does not appear economically sound for a state to allow its private citizens to accumulate such quantities of treasure. Whatever the measure of their public capacity I fail to see how they can rise to their responsibilities."

"But if," said I, "the State mulcts his grace of a farthingsworth, it is immediately denounced as a robber. Property is the most sacred thing we know in this country."

"His grace came by all this honestly, I hope?" said the King with an amused air.

"He came by it under forms of law, certainly."

"Which he himself did not make, I hope!" said the King, laughing.

"No, sir; his grandfather and the nominees of his

grandfather and so on managed that little business. Quite a constitutional proceeding, of course."

"I appreciate that," said Ferdinand the Twelfth with his subtle smile. "The British Constitution has long been the envy of nations. I suppose our friend is a man of great public spirit who has rendered signal service to the British Empire."

"On the contrary, he prefers the pleasant obscurity of the English gentleman."

"His forbears, then?"

"The late Duke was an imbecile; and I am afraid if any one took the trouble to search the records of the family since it came to this country from Germany about the year 1700, there is only one episode involving signal public spirit recorded in its archives."

"A glorious victory, a Blenheim, a Waterloo, I presume?" said Ferdinand the Twelfth.

"No, sir; peace has her victories also. This distinguished family has won the Derby Horse Race on two occasions."

"A wonderful people, Schalk?" said the King, laughing.

Her Royal Highness clapped her hands impulsively in the face of Mrs. Arbuthnot.

"There, Irene, what did I say!" she exclaimed. "Perrault!—wherever you go in this little island you find Perrault. My father has now found Perrault. Even Schalk has found him."

"Sonia, dear, you are too funny!" said Mrs. Arbuthnot with a plaintively childlike air of tacit condescension.

The King informed his grace's steward, a gentleman with a bald head and a very conventional aspect, who awaited us in the entrance hall to see us safely off the premises, that he would like to write his name in the visitors' book. Unaware of the identity of Ferdinand the Twelfth and by no means approving of the general trend of our conversation, the steward said with cold politeness that he feared the visitors' book was only used by his grace's guests.

The King took up a piece of red pencil that lay on a writing-table.

"We will write on the wall," he said blandly.

The steward was shocked and scandalised, but no heed was paid to his protests. The King wrote his name on the wall in bold and firm English characters, immediately beneath Lely's portrait of the founder of the family.

This accomplished, the King gave the pencil to his daughter, who inscribed her name also. She in turn gave it to the Chancellor, who followed her example. He then gave the pencil to Mrs. Arbuthnot.

That lady coloured with embarrassment, but at the King's express desire she wrote her name too; and when it came to the turn of the Conservative member for that part of the county he had no alternative but to obey the royal command.

Our names duly appeared on the wall in the following order:

Ferdinand Rex	*Irene Arbuthnot*
Sonia	*Nevil Fitzwaren*
Von Schalk	*Odo Arbuthnot, M.P.*

Upon the completion of this act of vandalism, the victor of Rodova turned to the steward.

"Haf the goodness to inform his grace," he said, "that the King of Illyria accepts entire responsibility for the writing on the wall. It is the writing on the wall for him and for his country."

As we went towards the motor cars which awaited us at a side entrance, we had to pass down a flight of stone steps. In the descent the King was seized with a sudden and momentary faintness. He reeled, and had it not been for the promptitude of the ever-watchful Chancellor he must have fallen.

"Dat is the writing on the wall for the people of Illyria," said the Victor of Rodova with humorous stoicism as he recovered himself.

CHAPTER XXIX

THE CAST OF THE DIE

Upon the return to Dympsfield House, three telegrams in cypher were waiting for the King. Two secretaries, who with divers other unofficial members of his suite were staying at the Coach and Horses, were in possession of the library, which had been placed at the royal disposal. At dinner that evening we were informed that the Teutonic display of red fire had provoked a grave internal crisis in Illyria. The National Bank was about to suspend payment; Consolidated stock was at fifty-nine; and his Majesty must leave these shores in the course of Saturday.

I could not repress a sigh of relief, although, to be sure, this was no more than the evening of Wednesday.

"Old Vesuvius is beginning to rumble again," said the King with a laugh that sounded rather sinister, "but he cannot make us believe in him. How say you, my child?"

He looked across the table at the Princess, who was as pale as death.

Here was the indication of the final and supreme crisis for her and for her husband, and the hearts of those to whom she had come to mean much were torn

with pity. Elemental, uncontrollable forces had her in their toils.

Fitz, too, had all our pity. The strain of true grandeur at the heart of the man, which all that was superficial could not efface, had asserted itself in this season of anguish. A lesser nature might have taken steps to relieve his wife of the torment of his presence. But in the watches of the night he had referred the question, and now, come what must, he would meet his fate.

There was reason to believe that he had already thrown his weight in the scale on the side of Ferdinand. He had stopped short of self-immolation, it was true; he had placed another interpretation on the Voice; but it seemed to me, his friend, that his whole bearing was a piece of altruistic heroism which could have had few parallels.

"Ferdinand is right," he said as we kept vigil in my quarters. "The interests of a great people are of more account than a chap like me. I know it, and Sonia knows it too."

The words were torn from him. It was curious how this contained and self-reliant spirit yearned for the sanction that it was in the power of a sympathetic understanding to bestow. If he dealt himself a mortal wound he must have a friend at his side. If he had superhuman strength, at least he had human weakness. Men of valour are proud as a rule. Fitz in the hour of his passion had a humility, a craving for the countenance of his fellows that I could only do my best to render in a humble way. The walk of mediocrity saves

us from many things, but I suppose there are seasons in the lives of some who wear its badge when we would willingly forego its comfortable consciousness of immunity for some diviner gift.

It was as though my unhappy friend was bleeding, perhaps to death, and I knew not how to stanch his wound.

Neither of us sought our beds that night, but sat and smoked hour after hour, in silence for the most part, beside a dead fire. He wished me to be near him, almost as a dumb animal yearns for those who shew a sympathetic understanding of its pain, even if they are powerless to make it less.

As thus we sat together my mind envisaged the chequered career of my companion in all its phases. I recalled him in his first pair of trousers at his private school; I recalled him as my fag in that larger cosmogony in which afterwards we dwelt together. As his senior, in those days I had unconsciously regarded him as less than myself. But this night, as I sat with him, consumed with pity for the tragic wreck of his fortunes, I realised that he was one whose life was passed on a higher, more significant plane than mine could ever occupy.

It was good to feel that I had nothing with which to reproach myself in regard to my attitude towards him in those distant days. His fits of depression, his outbursts of deviltry, his dislike of games, the streak of fatalism that was in him, his impatience of all authority had exposed him to many hardships. But I was glad to think that I need not accuse myself of imperfect

sympathy towards this fantastically odd, yet high and enduring spirit.

Thursday came and passed in gloom. Even Ferdinand, that heart of steel, was feeling the poignancy of the crisis. Throughout the day Sonia did not appear. But in the evening Irene sat with her in her room.

"If I were she," she declared to me later, with tearful defiance, "I would not go back—that is, unless they accepted my husband as their future king."

"They cannot do that."

"I think the King himself is so wrong. He hates Nevil, and he has not the least affection for poor little Marie, his granddaughter. It is a dreadful state of things."

I concurred dismally. Yet it was a state of things arising so naturally, so inevitably out of the special circumstances of the case that it seemed almost to forfeit a little of its tragic significance.

"If only she is strong enough to hold out until Saturday," said my feminine counsellor. "But I am rather afraid. She is quite weak in some ways."

"There is a weakness, isn't there, which is a higher form of strength?"

"Can you mean that she will not be weak if she consents to return to Illyria to marry the Archduke Joseph?"

"She owes a duty to her people."

"She owes a duty to her husband and child."

Thursday ended as it began and Friday brought no solace. The Princess reappeared among us in the afternoon. She was pale and composed, and as the twilight

of the January afternoon was gathering, she and Fitz rode out together. The King, at the same hour, walked in the muddy lanes with von Schalk.

"They leave us to-morrow morning at eleven," Mrs. Arbuthnot informed me, "and Sonia has not had her things packed. I believe the worst is over. She would have told me had she decided to go."

I was unable to share her optimism. From the first I had felt that the stars in their courses would prove too much for the unhappy lady. And nothing had occurred to remove that fear.

The King returned from his walk, and suave and subtle of countenance, it pleased him to toy with a cup of Mrs. Arbuthnot's tea, while he toasted his muddy gaiters at the fire.

"My daughter has not returned from her ride?"

"No, sir," I informed him.

"The last ride together," said the King gently. "One of your excellent English poets has a poem about it, has he not?"

A thrill passed through my nerves at the almost cruel directness of the King's speech. I saw that in the same moment the eyes of Mrs. Arbuthnot had filled with tears.

"You have great poets in England," said the King softly. "They are the chief glories of a nation, and your country is rich in them. We have great poets in Illyria also. There is Bolder. We are all proud to be the countrymen of Bolder. When you come to see us at Blaenau I think you will like to meet him."

As the King spoke in his paternal voice, I was conscious of his hand upon the breast of my coat. He had

pinned a piece of black ribbon upon it, to which was attached a silver star.

"I am afraid, sir," I said, suffering some embarrassment, "no man ever did less to deserve the Order of the Silver Star of Illyria."

The King took my hand in his with that wonderful cordial sympathy that was so hard to resist.

"A friend in need is a friend indeed, Mr. Arbuthnot, as your English saying has it. And, madame, when together we lead the cotillon at Blaenau, I hope you will honour us by wearing this."

The King laid a jewel of much beauty upon the tea-table.

"Oh, sir," said Mrs. Arbuthnot, smiling faintly through wet eyelashes.

Standing before the fire, tea-cup in hand, the King talked to us quite simply and pleasantly and sincerely. He was a man of great power of mind and his outlook upon life was large and direct.

"You have many ways in this country that I should like to see in ours," he said. "But we in Illyria make haste slowly. The climate is not so bracing. I am afraid we do not think so forcibly. And there is a wider gulf between the rich and the poor."

There was a note of regret in the King's tone. He seemed to be turning his eyes to the future, and in the process his face grew tired and melancholy. It was then that I realised that this man of infinite vigour and power was said to be near the end of his course.

At dinner we were enlivened by his gaiety. His charm was hard to resist, so rich and full it was and so

spontaneous. But my thoughts strayed ever away from the King, his wisdom and his persiflage, to those who were one flesh in the sight of God, who were dining together for the last time.

Their courage was a noble, even an amazing thing. The stoicism with which they ate and drank and bore a part in the conversation while a chasm had opened beneath their feet was almost incredible. Throughout the perpetual oscillation from comedy to tragedy, from tragedy to comedy, from comedy to tragedy again of their life together, they had borne their parts with a heroic constancy, and even in this dark phase they were equal to their task.

The die was cast. On the morrow the Princess would return to her people, marry the Archduke, and when the time came accept the throne. It was part of the dreadful covenant the King had exacted that she would never see Fitz and their child again.

I passed a night of weary wretchedness. Do what I would, I could not keep Fitz out of my thoughts. About three o'clock I rose and dressed and put on my overcoat and walked out into the garden. Somehow I expected to find him there. But there was not a trace of him, and every window in the house was dark. A spirit of desolation seemed to pervade everything—so dark and chill was the night. There was not a star to be seen.

I went back to my room, coaxed up the fire, seated myself beside it and lit a pipe. Presently I heard a footfall on the stairs. It was Irene, pale and weary

with much weeping. Daylight found her asleep in my arms with her head on my shoulder.

The day of the King's departure had come at last. There was a general scurry of preparation, but precisely at eleven o'clock a procession of six motor cars started from our door for Middleham railway station, whence a special train would proceed to Southampton. It was Sonia's wish that Irene and I should accompany her to the train; and poor Fitz, half stunned as he was, determined to play out the game to the end, and with one of his odd outbursts of cynicism affirmed his sportsmanlike intention of "being in at the death."

The King, his daughter, the Chancellor, and Mrs. Arbuthnot were in the second car, preceded by a special escort from Scotland Yard. Fitz and I had the third to ourselves; the Secretaries were in the fourth; the fifth and six conveyed the valets, her Royal Highness's maid and a considerable quantity of luggage.

As the procession, at the modest rate of twelve miles an hour, came into the pleasant village of Lymeswold, where our revered Vicar has his cure of souls, there was a considerable amount of bunting displayed in the vicinity of the Coach and Horses. And from the windows of the Rectory itself depended the Union Jack side by side with the silver Star of Illyria on a green ground. Mrs. Vicar waved a white pocket handkerchief from the gate of the manse, but the Vicar was bearing a chief part in a more dramatic tableau that had been arranged on the village green. Here the village school was drawn up, the girls in nice white pinafores and the boys looking almost painfully well washed. Each had

a small flag that was waved frantically, and the Vicar standing at their head led a prodigious quantity of cheering, while Ferdinand the Twelfth took off his hat and bowed.

But all this was merely a prelude to the historic spectacle that we came upon presently. At the top of the steep hill leading to the Marl Pits, that favourite haunt of "the stinkin' Middleshire phocks," lo and behold! all the Crackanthorpe horses, all the Crackanthorpe men, not to mention their ladies, their hounds and the entire hunt establishment, even unto Peter the terrier, were assembled in full array of battle, as became the hour of eleven o'clock in the morning of a rare scenting day in the middle of January. The cavalcade lined each side of the road, and our motor cars passed through it on their lowest speed, to a running accompaniment of cheers and hunting noises and a waving of hats and handkerchiefs.

Evidently the scene had been carefully stage-managed and formed a handsome and appropriate *amende*. It did not fail of its appeal to the broken-hearted circus rider from Vienna. She responded by kissing her hand repeatedly, and her father lifted his hat and bowed continually as though it were a state procession.

The heart of Mrs. Arbuthnot was in pieces, but it was a great moment in the history of the clan. The china blue eyes were brimming over with their tears, but they were still capable of radiating a subtle feminine light of triumph.

The noble Master blew a blast on his horn and his aide-de-camp, Joseph Jocelyn De Vere Vane-Anstruther,

marked the royal progress by hoisting his hat on his whip. As we passed Mrs. Catesby, who looked very red, the brims of whose hat looked wider and whose whole appearance approximated more nearly than ever to that of Mr. Weller the Elder, I bestowed a special salutation upon her, of, I fear, somewhat ironical dimensions. The Great Lady responded by shaking her whip at me in a decidedly truculent manner.

Our procession passed on to Middleham railway station, which we reached about a quarter to twelve. A considerable crowd had assembled about its precincts. The roadway and the entrance to the station were guarded by a body of mounted police, and a small detachment of the Middleshire Yeomanry in the charge of no less a person than Major George Catesby who saluted us with his sword.

On the platform we were received by a number of local dignitaries, and foremost among these, tall and austere, but with the faint light of humour in his countenance, was Lieutenant-Colonel John Chalmers Coverdale, C.M.G., late of his Majesty's Carabineers.

The King and his Chancellor took a brief but cordial leave of us and stepped briskly into the royal saloon; and then I felt the pressure of a woman's hand, and I heard a low broken whisper, "Be good for my sake to Nevil and little Marie." The Princess then took the hands of Mrs. Arbuthnot in each of her own, kissed her wet cheeks, and was handed into the train by her husband she had promised never to see in this life again.

CHAPTER XXX

REACTION

The week that followed the royal departure was a season of reaction at Dympsfield House. The tension of our recent life had been well nigh unendurable. But now the die was cast, the problem solved; we could live and move and enjoy our being according to our wont.

To be sure the unhappy Fitz was still our anxiety. He and his small daughter were still under our roof, and would so remain until the house of his fathers had been rebuilt or until such time as he should choose some other asylum for his shattered life.

It is not too much to say that Fitz, with all his quiddity, had become dear to us. The tragic wreck of his life had called forth all that latent nobility which I at any rate, as his oldest friend, had always known to be there. His submission to the fate which he had himself invoked had seemed to soften the grosser elements that were in his clay. He had now only his small elf of four to live for. In that vivid atom of mortality were reproduced many of the characteristics of the ill-starred "circus rider from Vienna."

During the first few days a kind of stupor lay upon Fitz. He hardly seemed able to realise what had happened. He went out hunting and actively superintended

the rebuilding of the Grange, almost as if nothing had occurred to him. But all too soon, this merciful veil was withdrawn from his mind. He became consumed by restlessness. He could not sleep nor eat his food; he could not settle to any sort of occupation; nothing seemed able to engage his interest; his mind lost its stability, and slowly but surely his will began to lose that reawakened power that it had seemed to be the special function of his marriage to sustain and promote.

By the time the first week had passed we began to have forebodings. Already signs were not wanting that the demons of a sinister inheritance were silently marshalling themselves in order that they might swoop down upon him. One afternoon I found him asleep on a sofa drunk.

As Coverdale was well acquainted with his temperament and all the most salient facts in its history, and as, moreover, he was a man for whose natural soundness of judgment I had the greatest respect, I was moved to take him into my confidence.

"He must get away from England," said Coverdale, "for a time at any rate. And he must go soon."

This was an opinion with which I agreed. It happened that Coverdale knew a man who was about to start on a journey across Equatorial Africa and who proposed to form a hunting camp and indulge in some big game shooting by the way. Such a scheme appeared so eminently suited to Fitz's immediate needs that I hailed it gladly.

Alas! when I discussed this project with him he declined wholly to entertain it; moreover he declined with

all that odd decision which was one of his chief characteristics.

"No," he said. "I must stay here and see to the building of the house and I must look after Marie."

It was in vain that I launched my arguments. The scheme did not appeal to him and there, as far as he was concerned, was the end to the matter.

"I must look after Marie," he said. "We are getting her to do sums. Her mother could never do a sum to save her life."

Argument was vain. Such a nature was incapable of accepting a suggestion from an outside source; the mainspring of all its actions lay within.

The total failure of the attempt to get him to respond to so hopeful an alternative vexed me sorely. At the time it seemed to promise the only means of saving him from the danger which already had him in its toils. He grew more and more restless; his distaste for food grew more pronounced, and in an appallingly short time it became clear to us that whatever there remained to be done for him must be done at once.

We were helpless nevertheless. To anything in the nature of persuasion he remained impervious. He could not be brought to see the nearness of the danger. It was like him never to heed the question of cost. He could never have ordered his life as he had done, had he not had the quality of projecting the whole of himself into the actual hour.

Those who had his welfare at heart were still taking counsel one of another in respect of what could be done to help him through this new crisis, when a mandate was

received from Mrs. Catesby to dine at the Hermitage. Fitz was included in it, but it did not surprise us that he declined an invitation which less uncompromising persons were inclined to regard in the light of a command.

It was not that he bore malice. He was altogether beyond the pettiness of the minor emotions; it was as though his entire being, for good or for evil, had been raised to another dimension or higher power. But as he said with his haggard face, "I don't feel up to it."

Lowlier mortals, more specifically Mrs. Arbuthnot and myself, accepted humbly and contritely. We felt that a certain piquancy would invest the gathering. Not that we knew exactly who had been bidden to attend it, but Mrs. Arbuthnot's feminine instinct—and what is so impeccable in such matters as these?—proclaimed this dinner party to be neither more nor less than the public signature of the articles of peace.

Accordingly we set out for the Hermitage, not however without a certain travail of the spirit, for poor Fitz would be left to a lonely cutlet which he would not eat. As a matter of fact, when we went forth he had not returned from London where he had spent most of the day in consultation with his solicitors.

There assembled at the Hermitage, at which we arrived in very good time, nearly every identical member of the company we expected to meet. Coverdale, Brasset, Jodey, who still enjoyed the hospitality of our neighbour, the Vicar and his Lavinia, Laura Glendinning, Mrs. Josiah P. Perkins. Also as became one whose house provided a kind of *via media* to that greater world

of which the Castle was the embodiment, Mrs. Catesby's dinner table was graced by a younger son and a daughter-in-law of the ducal house.

Good humour reigned. It might even be said to amount in the course of the pleasant process of deglutition to a sort of friendly badinage. An atmosphere of tolerance pervaded all things. If bygones were not actually bygones, they were in a fair way of so becoming. At least this particular section of the Crackanthorpe Hunt was on the high road to being once again a happy and united family.

The revelation of the "Stormy Petrel's" identity had had a magic influence upon an immense aggregation of wounded feelings. It was now felt pretty generally that all might be forgiven without any grave sacrifice of personal dignity. It was conceded that great spirit had been shown on both sides, but in the special and peculiar circumstances a display of Christian magnanimity was called for.

Irene was morally and wickedly wrong—the phrase is Mrs. Catesby's own—in keeping the secret so well. Of course "the circus proprietor" had deceived nobody: it was merely childish for Irene to suppose for one single moment that he would; and for her to attempt "a score" of that puerile character was positively infantile. But in the opinion of the assembled jury of matrons, plus Miss Laura Glendinning specially co-opted, it was felt very strongly that Irene had not quite played the game.

"Child," said the Great Lady speaking *ex cathedra*, with a piece of bread in one hand and a piece of turbot on a fork in the other, "when I consider that I chose

your husband's first governess, quite a refined person, of the sound, rather old-fashioned evangelical school, I feel that it was morally and wickedly wrong of you to withhold from me of *all* people the identity of the dear Princess."

"But, Mary," said the light of my existence, toying demurely with her sherry, "I didn't know who she was myself until nearly a week after the fire."

The Great Lady bolted her bread and laid down her fork with an approximation to that which can only be described as majesty.

"Would you have me believe," she demanded, "that when you took her to your house on the night of the fire you really and sincerely believed that she was merely the wife of Nevil?"

"Yes, Mary," said the joy of my days, "I really and sincerely believed that she was the circus—I mean, that is, that she was just Mrs. Fitz."

General incredulity, in the course of which George Catesby inquired very politely of the Younger Son if he had enjoyed his day.

"Never enjoyed a day so much," said the Younger Son, with immense conviction, "since we turned up that old customer without a brush in Dipwell Gorse five years ago to-morrow come 11.15 g.m."

"11.20, my lad," chirruped the noble Master. "Your memory is failin'."

"Irene," said the uncompromising voice from the end of the table, "I cannot and will not allow myself to believe that you were not in the secret before the fire."

"Tell it to the marines, Irene," said Mrs. Josiah P. Perkins.

"Wonder what she will ask us to believe next," said Miss Laura Glendinning.

"What indeed!" said the Vicar's wife.

"It isn't human nature," affirmed Lady Frederick.

"Very well, then," said the star of my destiny, with an ominous sparkle of a china blue eye, "you can ask Odo."

"Odo!" I give up the attempt to reproduce the cataclysm of scorn which overwhelmed the table. "Odo is quite as bad as you are, if not worse. He knew from the first. He knew when the Illyrian Ambassador came in person to the Coach and Horses and fetched her in his car; he knew when she chaffed dear Evelyn so delightfully that night at the Savoy."

"What if he did?" said the undefeated Mrs. Arbuthnot. "He didn't tell me. Did you now, Odo?"

With statesmanlike mien I assured the company that Mrs. Fitz's identity was not disclosed to our household despot until some days after her arrival at Dympsfield House.

"I am obliged to believe you, Odo," said Mrs. Catesby. "But mind I only do so on principle."

Somehow this cryptic statement seemed to minister to the mirth of the table. It was increased when the Younger Son, who evidently had been waiting his opportunity, came into the conversation.

"Odo Arbuthnot, M.P.," said he, "I expect when Dick sees what you have done to his wall he'll sue you. Anyhow I should."

The approval which greeted this sally made it clear that the incident had become historical.

"By royal command," said I; "and what chance do you suppose has a mere private member against the despotic will of the father of his people?"

"A gross outrage. An act of vandalism. Postlewaite says——"

"Postlewaite's an ass."

"Whatever Postlewaite is, it doesn't excuse you. He says you were all talking the rankest Socialism, and he was quite within his rights not to give you the book."

"I repeat, Frederick, that Postlewaite is an ass. If the Postlewaites of the earth think for one moment that the Victors of Rodova will turn the other cheek to the retort discourteous, the sooner they learn otherwise the better it will be for them and those whom they serve."

"Hear, hear and cheers," said my gallant little friend, Mrs. Josiah P. Perkins, in spite of the fact that the Great Lady had fixed her with her invincible north eye.

"Ferdinand Rex one doesn't mind so much," proceeded Frederick. "And the Princess is all right of course, and von Schalk is a bit of a Bismarck they say; but when you come to foot the bill with Odo Arbuthnot, M.P.—well, as Postlewaite says, it is nothing less than an act of vandalism. The M.P. fairly cooked my goose, I must say."

The M.P. was very bad form, everybody agreed, with the honourable and gallant exception of *la belle Americaine.*

"Might be a labour member! I don't know what Dick'll say when he sees it."

"Two alternatives present themselves to my mind," said I, impenitently. "Postlewaite can either clear off the whole thing before he returns, else append a magic 'C' in brackets after the offending symbols."

"You ain't entitled to a 'C' in brackets. You grow a worse Radical every day of your life and everybody is agreed that it is time you came out in your true colours."

"Hear, hear," from the table.

"I've half a mind to oppose you myself at the next election as a convinced Tariff Reformer, Anti-Socialist, Fair Play for Everybody, and official representative of a poor but deserving class."

"We shall all be glad to sign your nomination paper," affirmed George Catesby.

"Well, Lord Frederick," said my intrepid Mrs. Josiah, "I will just bet you a box of gloves anyway that you don't get in."

"And I'll bet you another," said Mrs. Arbuthnot.

"He's not such a fool as to try," said the noble Master.

"Frederick," said the Great Lady, "stick to your muttons. You have plenty to do to raise breed and quality. Why not try a cross between the Welsh and the Southdown? At least I am convinced that in these days the House of Commons offers no career for a gentleman."

"I've a great mind to cut in and have a shot anyway," said the scion of the ducal house, with a mild

confusion of metaphor. "I don't see why these Radical fellers——"

Whatever the speech was in its integrity, it was destined never to be completed. For at this precise moment the door was flung open in a dramatic manner, and a haggard man wearing an overcoat and carrying his hat in his hand, broke in upon Mrs. Catesby's dinner party.

CHAPTER XXXI

NEWS FROM ILLYRIA

THE man was Fitz.

"A thousand apologies," he said. "So sorry to disturb you all. But there's news from Illyria."

Such a very remarkable obtrusion enchained the attention of us all. And this was not rendered less by the self-possession of the speaker's manner.

"Ferdinand has been assassinated," Fitz's tone was slow and contained; "the Monarchy has been overthrown, Sonia is a close prisoner in the castle at Blaenau, and her fate hangs in the balance."

"What is your authority?" said Coverdale.

"Reuter," said Fitz. "A telegram is printed in the evening papers. I happened to buy one at the bookstall as I left town."

He produced the *Westminster Gazette* from the pocket of his overcoat and handed it to the Chief Constable.

"You don't suppose," said Coverdale, frowning heavily, "that they are capable of personal violence towards the Princess?"

"At bottom they are only half civilised," said Fitz, "and when their passions are aroused they are capable of anything. You will see the telegram says the gov-

ernment is in the hands of a committee of the people. And no wise man ever trusts the people and never will."

This feudal sentiment was uttered in a tone of the oddest conviction.

"By jove!" said the scion of the ducal house, "here is the chap we are looking for."

But the intrusion of Fitz was too deadly serious for any side issue to be allowed to distract our attention.

"I apologise to you, Mrs. Catesby, for spoiling your dinner party like this," he said, "but it is my firm conviction that if the Princess is to be saved there is not a moment to lose."

"One is inclined to agree with you," said Coverdale, slowly and thoughtfully. "Has it occurred to you that anything can be done?"

Fitz's reply, given quietly enough, was characteristic of the man.

"To-day is Monday," he said. "By midnight on Thursday we shall have her out of Blaenau."

"Impossible, my dear fellow, impossible," said the Chief Constable, "if this account is correct."

"Nothing is impossible," said the Man of Destiny. "There is just time now to catch the ten o'clock to-night from Middleham. First thing to-morrow morning we will get our papers if we can, and if we can't we'll go without them. We shall be in Paris some time in the afternoon; and if all goes well by Wednesday evening we shall be in Vienna. By five o'clock on Thursday we ought to be at Orgov on the Milesian frontier, and six hours' easy riding over the mountains with a couple of baits will land us at Blaenau."

We who knew Fitz and had followed him in high affairs knew better than to venture upon criticism of this bald and unconvincing scheme. Those who did not know him could only smile incredulously.

"Sounds easy," said Lord Frederick, "but assuming, Fitzwaren, that you get to Blaenau like that, what can it profit you if the Princess is in the Castle under lock and key?"

"Stone walls do not a prison make nor iron bars a cage," quoted the Man of Destiny. "Once we get to Blaenau we shall have her out of the Castle, never fear about that. But there is no time to discuss the matter now. If we go at once and collect our gear—so sorry, Mrs. Catesby, but absolutely unavoidable—we can be in town by 12.15, arrange about our papers and keep well in front of the clock."

The man's calm assumption that we should all unhesitatingly follow his lead and commit ourselves to this rather mad and certainly most uncomfortable enterprise was remarkable.

"There is not a minute to lose," he said. "By the way, Arbuthnot, I've told Peters to pack a kit bag for you. And this time, old son, you had better see that you don't forget your revolver."

Under the goad of the Chief Constable's uneasy eye I was fain to gaze at the black silk handkerchief, which still bore my wrist.

"I'm afraid I'm a lame duck anyway," I said.

"You will do to hold the horses at the foot of the Castle rock. Climbing up the face of that cliff will be out of the question as far as you are concerned. Now

then, you fellows," the Man of Destiny took out his watch, "you have just two minutes to finish your port and get your cigars alight and then it's boot and saddle."

"Nevil," said the imperious voice of the Great Lady, "I am really afraid you are mad."

The Man of Destiny did not deign to heed this irrelevant suggestion.

The exigencies of historical truth render it necessary to record the fact that Joseph Jocelyn De Vere Vane-Anstruther was undoubtedly the first respondent to the call. My relation by marriage drank his port wine and rose in his place at Mrs. Catesby's board. There was a fire in his eye and the suspicion of a hectic flush upon his countenance which seemed to contrast strangely with the habitual languor of his bearing.

"First thing we must do is to send a wire to old Alec," he said; "although he is certain not to be in if we send it. If we get to town by 12.15 I will trot round to the Continental. The beggar is sure to be there until they kick him out as there is a ball to-night at Covent Garden."

This reasoning may have been lucid and it may have been pregnant; at least it recommended itself to the comprehensive intellect of the Man of Destiny.

"Quite right, Vane-Anstruther. I shall hold you responsible for O'Mulligan."

"Joseph," said the Great Lady upon a stentorian note, "are you mad also?"

Hardly had this pertinent inquiry been advanced when the noble Master was on his legs.

"So awfully sorry, Mrs. Catesby," he said with a long-drawn sweetness of apology, "but it can't be helped in the circumstances, can it? I leave hounds in the care of George and Frederick. Keep Potts up to his work, George, and see that he pays proper attention to their feet. And, Frederick, I charge you to make it your business to see that Madrigal has a ball every Friday."

"Reginald," said his hostess with great energy, "in the unavoidable absence of your widowed and unfortunate mother, I absolutely forbid you to bear a part in this hare-brained enterprise. I really don't know what Nevil can be thinking of."

In Ascalon whisper it not, but this was the precise moment in which I found the cynical eye of the Chief Constable upon me for the second time. The eye was also wary and a little pensive, but the great man rose in his place with an air of profound rumination. He slowly cracked a walnut and then turned to the butler, with a coolness which to my mind had a suspicion of the uncanny.

"Just tell my chap to have my car round at once," he said; and then with great deference to his hostess, "a thousand apologies, Mrs. Catesby, but you do see, don't you, that it can't be helped?"

Whether I rose to my feet by an act of private volition or at the sub-conscious beck of another's compelling power, there is no need to attempt to determine. But somehow I found myself upon my legs and adding my own imperfect apologies to the equally imperfect ones of the Chief Constable.

"Odo Arbuthnot," said my hostess, "sit down at once. A married man, a father of a family and a county member! Sit down *at* once and get on with your fruit. Colonel Coverdale! I am surprised at you."

"Finished your port, Arbuthnot?" said Fitz calmly. "Time's about up. But I've told your chap about the car."

Consternation mingled now with the lively feminine bewilderment, but Mrs. Arbuthnot, whom Fitz's news had excited and distressed, issued no personal edict. If the life of Sonia was really at stake it was right to take a risk. Nevertheless it shewed a right feeling about things to betray a little public perturbation at the prospect of being made a widow.

"Jodey and Reggie and Colonel Coverdale must go," said Mrs. Arbuthnot. "They haven't wives and families dependent upon them. But you, Odo, are different. And then, too, your wrist. You would be of no use if you went."

"I shall do to hold the horses at the foot of the Castle rock," said I, saluting a white cheek.

Fitz was already withdrawing from the room with his volunteers when Lord Frederick rose in his place at the board.

"Look here, Fitzwaren," he said. "If you have a vacancy in your irregulars I rather think I'll make one."

"By all means," said Fitz. "The more the merrier."

Bewilderment and consternation mounted ever higher around Mrs. Catesby's mahogany.

"Freddie! Freddie!" There arose a tearful wail from across the table.

"You ought to be bled for the simples, Frederick," said his hostess.

However, even as the Great Lady spoke, honest George, most conscientious of husbands, and notwithstanding his rank in the Middleshire Yeomanry, the most peace-loving of men, was understood to make an offer of active service.

"Well done, George," said his friend the Vicar. "I shouldn't mind coming as the chaplain to the force myself."

"George," said an imperious voice from the table head, "George!"

The Man of Destiny halted a moment on the threshold of the banquet hall with the frank eye of cynicism fixed midway between the Great Lady and the warlike George.

"George! Sit down!"

Finally George sat down with a covert glance at his friend the Vicar.

By the time we had got into our overcoats and mufflers and the means of travel had been provided for us, a scene with some pretensions to pathos had been enacted in the hall.

"Odo, you really ought not, but if dear Sonia really is in danger!"

"We shall all be back a week to-night," the Man of Destiny informed my somewhat tearful monitor with a note of assurance in his voice.

Moving objurgations of "Freddie! Freddie!" were

mingled with the clarion note of Mrs. Catesby's indignation.

"It is a mad scheme, and if you get your deserts, you will all be shot by the Illyrians."

But Fitz and I were already seated side by side in the car. We waved a farewell to the bewildered company upon the hall steps, and then the fact seemed slowly to be borne in upon my numbed intelligence that yet again I was irrevocably committed to this latest and maddest call of my evil genius. There he sat by my side, his cigar a small red disc of fire, and he self-possessed, insouciant, dæmonic, almost gay.

The flaccid, rudderless creature of the past ten days was gone as though he had never been. It was hard to realise that this born leader of others, who courted war like a mistress, the magic of whose initiative the coolest and sanest could not resist, was the self-same broken fragment of human wreckage who twenty-four hours ago had not the motive power to perform the simplest action. But there could be no question of the magic he knew how to exert over the most diverse natures; and as we sat side by side in the semi-darkness of the car while it flew along the muddy, winding and narrow roads to Dympsfield House, I yielded almost with a thrill of exultation to the director of my fate.

CHAPTER XXXII

MORE ALARUMS AND EXCURSIONS

We had no difficulty in reaching Middleham railway station, that familiar rendezvous, at the appointed time. Even Lord Frederick who lived farther afield than any of us, was able by putting a powerful car to an illegal use, to arrive on the stroke of the hour.

It was to be remarked that the prevailing tone in our *coupé* was one which almost amounted to gaiety. Judged by the cold agnostic eye, the scheme was only a little this side of madness. But it had the sanction of a high motive. Further, we were brothers in arms who had smelt powder together upon a more dubious enterprise; we had faith in one another; and above all we were sustained, one might even say translated, by the epic quality of an incomparable leader.

Fitz smoked his cigar and cut in at a rubber of bridge with an air of indulgent and serene content.

"It is lucky," he said, "that I know an old innkeeper on the frontier who will be *rather* useful if we have to go without passports. He is about a mile on the Milesian side, and will be able to provide us with horses and smuggle us across in the darkness. He will also find for us a couple of guides over the mountains."

"You say we can get from the frontier to the Castle

at Blaenau in six hours?" inquired the gruff voice of the Chief Constable.

"Yes, unless there is a lot of snow in the passes."

"But if the country is in a state of revolution, aren't we likely to be held up?"

"Perhaps; perhaps not. We shall find a way if we have to take an airship. Eh, Joe?"

The Man of Destiny gave my relation by marriage a paternal punch in the ribs.

"Ra-*ther*!" That hero was in the act of cutting an ace and winning the deal.

"I shall arrange," said Fitz, "for a change of horses at Postovik, which is about half-way. If all goes well we shall be at the foot of the Castle rock a little before midnight on Thursday. I am thinking, though, that we may have to swim the Maravina."

"Umph!" growled the Chief Constable, declaring an original spade, "a moderately cheerful prospect on a January night in Illyria."

"It may not come to that, of course. But all the bridges and ferries are sure to be guarded. And even if they are, with a bit of luck we may be able to rush them."

As our leader began to evolve his plan of campaign it could not be said to forfeit any of its romance. But I think it would be neither fair nor gracious to Mr. Nevil Fitzwaren's corps of irregulars to say that this spice of adventure made less its glamour. We could all claim some little experience of war and that mimic sphere of action "that provides the image of war without its guilt, and only thirty per cent. of its dangers."

Some of us had taken cover upon the veldt and others had crossed the Blakiston after a week's rain; and we all felt as we sped towards the metropolis at the rate of sixty miles an hour, and at the same time endeavoured to restrain the cards from slipping on to the floor, that whatever Fate, that capricious mistress, had in store for us, our hazard was for as high a stake as any set of gamesters need wish to play.

Punctual to the minute, we came into the London terminus. As on the occasion of that former adventure, we posted off to Long's quiet family hotel, with the exception of Joseph Jocelyn De Vere Vane-Anstruther, who confided his kit-bag to the care of his man Kelly, and adjured him to see that a decent room was found for him, while he went "to rout out Alec at the Continental before they fired the beggar out."

"Tell him we leave Charing Cross at 10.40 in the morning," said Fitz. "That will give me time to see what can be done in the way of papers, although as far as Illyria is concerned, diplomatic relations are pretty sure to have been suspended."

Driving again to Long's Hotel, I was regaled with the remembrance of our former journey; of the incident of the cab which followed us through the November slush; of the weird sequel; of that long night of alarums and excursions, which yet was no more than a prelude to a chaotic vista of events.

I recalled the drive from Ward's with Coverdale; the slow-drawn tragi-comedy of suspense; the waiting-room at the Embassy, the plunge up the stairs, the charming player of Schumann, the presentation to her

Royal Highness. I recalled the passages with the Ambassador and their terrible issue; the drive with the Princess to the Savoy; the episode of the pink satin at which I could now afford to laugh. Again I recalled our bizarre visit to Bryanston Square; our reception by my uncle Theodore, his "Fear nothing," and his still more curious pre-vision of that which was to come to pass. I recalled our dash for this same Great British railway station and the merciful shattering of our hopes midway. I recalled the Scotland Yard inspector with the light moustache, the hand of the Princess guiding me through the traffic, the cool-fingered doctor, the bowl of crimson water at which I did not care to look. Finally, in this panoramic jumble of wild occurrences, the memory of which I should carry to the grave, I recalled that noble, complex, misguided emblem of our species, the Victor of Rodova, the clear-sighted, subtle yet great-hearted hero of an epoch in the destiny of nations; the father of his people, whom his children had slain even while the hand of death was already upon him.

I pictured him lying riddled with bullets on the steps of his palace at Blaenau, riddled with the bullets he had so often despised. Even from the brief account in the evening papers it was clear that the end of the Victor of Rodova had been heroic.

The smouldering volcano had burst into flame at last. A tax-gatherer had been slain in an outlying district. At the signal, a whole province, at the beck of one half-patriot, half-brigand, rose up, marched armed to the Capital, and called upon the King at his palace to

grant a charter to his people. The King met them alone, as was his custom, on the steps of his palace, and having listened with kindness and patience to their demands, made the reply "that he would take steps to procure the charter for his people, if the peccant son who had slain a faithful servant treacherously was rendered to justice."

Whether the King deliberately misread the temper of his subjects, or whether he overestimated the personal power it was his custom to exert, was hard to determine, but in this reply which was so strangely deficient in that high political wisdom, in which no man of his age excelled him, lay his doom. The leader of the armed mob, who himself had slain the tax-gatherer, laughed in the King's face, and immediately riddled him with bullets. And as the King fell, the burghers of Blaenau poured in at the gates, the soldiers revolted because their wages were overdue, possession was taken of the Castle and the long-deferred republic was proclaimed.

"And where were the aristocracy and the supporters of the monarchy while all this was happening?" I asked, as we sat in the lounge at the hotel having a final drink before turning in.

"Reading between the lines of the dispatch," said Fitz, "I should be inclined to say that they had conspired to throw Ferdinand over at the last and to let in the people. I can reconcile the facts on no other hypothesis."

"Why should they?"

"The aristocracy has always been jealous of his power. He has walked too much alone."

"It is hard to believe that they would yield up their country to mob law."

"They have their own safety to consider. A small and exclusive class, not accustomed to move very actively in public affairs, they have little control of events. And the army having joined with the people, their only hope is to sit on the fence and try to hold what they have."

"You are convinced of the Princess' danger?"

"There is no question of that. Having decided to make an end of their rulers, the French Revolution is quite likely to be enacted over again. They are a semi-barbarous people and few will deny that they have suffered."

On the morrow Fitz was early abroad. The morning papers brought confirmation of the news from Illyria. The King was dead; the Crown Princess was a close prisoner at Blaenau in the hands of the insurgents; the Chancellor and other ministers had fled the country; a number of regiments had massacred their officers; and it was expected that a Committee of the People would take over the government.

At Charing Cross we found Alexander O'Mulligan already waiting for us. He was in the pink of health and his grin was extraordinarily expansive. Fitz arrived with the necessary tickets for the whole party, but had only been able to procure passports as far as the frontier. But, as he explained, this need not trouble

us, as we should leave the train before we came there and make our way over the mountains in the darkness.

As our train wound its way through suburbia we began more clearly to realise the promise of a crowded and glorious week. The motive was adequate; and although the Chief Constable and myself had a profound sense of the rashness of the scheme, we shared the common faith in Fitz.

Our route was by way of Paris. It was more direct to go from Southampton, but there was very little difference in the point of actual time.

When we reached Paris, soon after five that afternoon, we learned that in spite of the representations of the Powers, the fate of the Princess still hung in the balance. We stayed only an hour and then took train again.

All night we travelled and all through the next day; and then, as Fitz had predicted, shortly after five o'clock in the evening of Thursday we had come to the township of Orgov, a mile from the Illyrian frontier on the borders of Milesia. Here we found a shrewd old peasant who had acted as the friend of Fitz on a former occasion, and with whom he had already communicated by telegraph. The old fellow shook his head over the state of affairs in the neighbouring kingdom, but provided us with a couple of trustworthy guides through the mountains and seven tolerable horses, one apiece for each member of our party.

Fitz affirmed his intention of getting to Blaenau in six hours. The innkeeper, however, declared frankly that this was impossible. The winter had been severe;

heavy drifts of snow lay in the passes, and in its present state the country itself was full of danger. Indeed, our friend the innkeeper was fain to declare that unless God was very kind to us, we should never get to Blaenau at all.

However, we were a party of nine, stout fellows, well armed and tolerably mounted. And when we started from Orgov a little after six in the evening, I do not think the sense of peril oppressed us much. Our mission was of the highest; each of us had faith in himself and in his comrades. We were a small but mobile force in fairly hard condition; and I think it may be claimed for each member of it that he had a natural love of adventure.

CHAPTER XXXIII

IN THE BALANCE

The air was shrewd as we set out from Orgov. We took a narrow, winding bridle path, uncomfortably steep in places, in order to avoid the frontier town of Boruna, wherein trouble might lurk. The stars were out already, with Mars straight before us wonderfully large and red as we rode due east. There was an exhilaration in the atmosphere that was like wine in the veins; and presently we caught the tail of an icy blast that made us glad to wrap our cloaks around us.

An impartial view of such an enterprise rendered it clear that the odds were greatly in favour of a total failure. How could six men and a cripple hope to penetrate into the heart of a closely guarded fortress? And assuming that we got in, by what means did we expect to make our way out again! In all conscience the scheme was wild enough, but this was not the hour in which to lay stress upon that fact.

There can be no doubt that the qualities of our leader were a great aid to his corps. Undaunted courage, invincible optimism were his in amplest measure; and this attitude of mind could not fail to react upon his comrades in arms. Moreover, in the most singular degree he appeared to combine with the

audacity of genius, a head for detail and a shrewd practical wisdom, which very seldom embellish the characters of those who depend primarily upon the faculty of inspiration.

As mile by mile we traversed these snow-laden Illyrian mountains, the possibility of anything less than complete success found no place in his thoughts. "Nothing is impossible," was his motto, and this he realised with plenary conviction. His twin soul was calling him to the castle at Blaenau, and not for an instant did he doubt his ability to obey the summons.

It was our plan to avoid as far as possible all centres of population. Our guides being men of experience, familiar with all the bypaths and bridle-roads, this we were able to do, and even to save time in the process. But as the innkeeper had insisted, Fitz's optimism had misled him when he expected to reach the Illyrian capital in six hours.

When we took our first bait, at an inn above the sinister waters of the Lake of Montardo, it was nearly nine o'clock. Coffee and cakes were very acceptable; indeed I have seldom tasted anything so delicious. But in spite of our diligence and a fair measure of luck, we had come rather less than twenty miles of the journey. Our horses were good for another twelve miles through the formidable pass of Ryhgo, where in the middle of winter the mountain streams are generally in spate.

We went on after a halt of a quarter of an hour. As yet we had seen few signs of the revolution. But at the inn above Montardo ugly rumours were rife. The people and the army were said to have turned

against the aristocracy; they were butchering them by the score and the Crown Princess was declared to be dead.

That our mission was being made in vain Fitz declined to believe. The man's courage had never seemed so remarkable as when confronted with this news.

"If she were already dead," he said simply, "I should have had information. I shall not believe it until I hold her corpse in my arms."

Through the pass of Ryhgo, overshadowed as it is by the gaunt Illyrian mountains, the narrow path wound along the very edge of a precipice. Below were the waters of the Lake of Montardo, which as we rode above it reflected a baleful grandeur to the stars. The wind was very piercing now and drove sheer in our faces; not a little did it add to the dangers of our progress through the pass. The horses had only to make a false step and their riders would be hurled a thousand feet into those terrible black waters gleaming below.

Before we had overcome this most precarious stage of our journey, the clouds were beaten up rapidly by the wind, and to add to our peril and discomfort it came on to snow. It was, therefore, a great relief when at last we came to an inn at a hamlet with an unpronounceable name which marked the end of the pass. It was then eleven o'clock and we had come little more than half the way.

Here we found a friend awaiting us. He was an Illyrian acquaintance of Fitz's, and he had arranged the details of our mountain journey. A member of a noble family, he was familiar with the court life at

Blaenau, and had borne the part of a friend in the previous episode which had culminated in the elopement of the Crown Princess.

He was an agreeable fellow, quite cosmopolitan, and had no difficulty in making himself understood in French, in which tongue he enjoyed a greater felicity than any of us. He answered to the name of John, although his full title, which was very long and hard to pronounce, I have forgotten. He, too, had heard the common report that the Princess was dead, but chose to express no opinion in regard to the truth of it.

When Fitz outlined his project, he expressed a mild astonishment.

"But how," said he, "will you cross the Maravina?"

"You don't suppose," said Fitz, "that we have come as far as this to be deterred by the crossing of the Maravina?"

"All the bridges are closely guarded by the Republicans. The ferries also."

"We can swim the Maravina, at a pinch."

"You English can do most things," said John, "but don't attempt to swim the Maravina in the middle of January is my advice."

John's view drew a growl of deep bass approval from no less a person than the Chief Constable of Middleshire.

"We shall do what we can," said the Man of Destiny, with excellent indifference.

"Yes, but we damn well needn't do what we can't," said the Chief Constable *sotto voce*, yet meaning no disrespect to his native tongue.

I must confess to an involuntary shudder, as, at the instance of a too-active imagination, the waters of the Maravina pierced a pair of leathers "by a local artist of the name of Jobson." They seemed miserably damp already. And if anything feels more miserable than a pair of leathers when they are damp, I pray to be spared the knowledge.

High as our mission was, the flesh was loth to quit the warm stove at the hostelry of "The Hanging Cross" for those terrible purlieus that wound through the heart of the wild Illyrian mountains. But at least we could congratulate ourselves that the pass of Ryhgo was at an end, and that the black waters of Lake Montardo no longer lay in wait for the hapless traveller a thousand feet below. Also the snow had ceased, the wind had fallen, Mars and his brethren were looking again upon us, and there was a faint suspicion of a crescent moon.

Our weary beasts had been exchanged for a fresh relay at the hostelry of "The Hanging Cross." In addition to a reinforcement in the shape of John, a led horse with a side saddle accompanied us for the use of the Princess. With fairer conditions and a path less perilous to traverse, we began to improve considerably upon our previous rate of progression. Then the road began again to grow difficult, but happily the sky kept clear.

During the later stages of the journey we passed through several hamlets and small towns. To judge by the lights in the windows of the houses and the demeanour of little groups of people in the streets, a

general spirit of uneasiness was abroad. Men clad in the picturesque skin caps, which are so typical of the country, were to be seen carrying formidable-looking guns; and although such a cavalcade excited their curiosity they allowed it to pass.

We had no adventures worthy of the name. In one of the mountain valleys a deep crevasse was concealed by a drift of snow, and we owed it to the vigilance of our guides that we were not its victims. The wind was still very piercing, but acting upon Fitz's advice before we started, we had all taken the precaution to be well clad.

Our progress was really better than we realised. A sudden turn in the road revealed a very broad and rapid torrent. It was the Maravina; and there upon the farther bank was the bluff upstanding rock crowned with the majestic castle of Blaenau. Nestling close about it was a dark huddle of houses and gaunt church spires of the capital city of Illyria.

"There you are," cried John, with a wave of the hand. "Now, my friends, are you tempted to swim across?"

"I daresay we shall find a bridge," said Fitz nonchalantly enough.

"They are all bound to be guarded by the enemy."

"Maybe," said the Man of Destiny imperturbably.

Away to the right, at the distance of a mile, was one of the smaller bridges into the city. It was a rickety, wooden structure, guarded by a gate with a turret, which had a quaintly mediæval aspect. In front of the gate a bright coke fire was burning in a bucket,

and sprawling around it in attitudes which suggested varying phases of somnolence were a number of men in uniform.

A shaggy, fierce-looking, finely-grown fellow rose to his feet and challenged us. Fitz replied promptly in his suavest and best Illyrian. Not a word of the conversation that ensued was intelligible to me, but it was punctuated by the approving laughter of John and the guides, and was conducted on both sides with the highest good-humour.

Its conclusion at any rate was in keeping with this surmise. Fitz was seen to slip a piece of gold into a furtive palm; the password was whispered to him; and the gate was opened just far enough for each of us to pass through one at a time.

"If there is a more corrupt rogue than an Illyrian corporal of infantry," said John, "on the face of this fair earth, I am glad to say I have met him not."

"Evil practices breed an evil state," said the sententious Fitz. "If chaps have to whistle for their wages what can you expect?"

"Let us hope the custodians of the Castle will prove as susceptible," I observed piously.

"Ah, there you have another sort of bird!" said Fitz.

There was a second gate on the city side of the bridge. This also was guarded by the soldiery, but the password given boldly got us through without a question. There were tall spikes set in a row on the top of the heavy and unwieldy gate. They were adorned with a row of human heads.

To me, I confess, these grisly mementoes brought a shudder.

"They appear to do things pleasantly at Blaenau," said Frederick.

"They can go one better than that, my son," said Fitz, "if they get the chance. I should advise each of you, in the case of emergency, to leave just one cartridge in his revolver."

To a married man, a father of a family, and a county member, with his left arm in a black silk handkerchief, who did not feel particularly secure in the saddle as he rode knee to knee across the bridge with his misguided friend the Chief Constable of Middleshire, the icy wind which saluted him from the mighty torrent swirling beneath, blew distinctly "thin." Somewhat bitterly he began to deplore that decree of fate which had bereft him of the use of a hand.

Through narrow, close-built streets, whose odours were decidedly unpleasant, we passed unmolested until we came into the shadow of the castle rock. In the faint light of the stars it towered a sheer and beetling pile.

Dismounting we tied the horses to a fence. Fitz took a dark lantern from his saddle; and among a miscellaneous collection of articles with which he had the forethought to provide himself, was a coil of rope. This it seemed was capable of adjustment into the form of a ladder; and our leader affirmed his intention of being the first man up the castle wall. He proposed to affix this contrivance to the coping at the top in

order that the others might climb up as easily and as expeditiously as possible.

There was nothing for me save to resign myself to stay with the two guides in charge of the horses. It would have been a physical impossibility for a man bereft of the use of an arm to climb that sheer precipice.

Fitz's parting words of advice to me were characteristic.

"If," said he, "a sentry should come along and want to know your business—I don't suppose he will, because they don't appear to have mounted a picket—knock out his brains at once, and make one of the guides put on his uniform and shoulder his gun and march up and down. So long, old son."

The Man of Destiny was gone, perhaps for ever. As each of my comrades in arms climbed over the low fence in his wake I wished him good luck. It seemed hardly a fighting chance that we should ever look on one another again.

They had left their cloaks behind, and these together with my own, were thrown over the horses which had carried us so well. Tobacco is a great solace in seasons of tension, but the long-drawn suspense to which I had to submit soon became intolerable.

To a lover of the *aurea mediocritas*, a twentieth century British paterfamilias confirmed in the comfortable security of a civil life, such a predicament was absurd. It was painful indeed to march hour after hour up and down the broken ground at the foot of the castle rock. A pipe was in my teeth, otherwise I was signally exposed to the rigours of a long January night in Illyria.

A bloody end was my perpetual contemplation. And I hardly dared to think what lay in store for my comrades, the faint hope of whose return it was my bounden duty to await.

There were moments in this season of poignant misery when I felt myself to be growing absolutely desperate. Why be ashamed to make the confession? The sensation of impotence was truly terrible. As the time passed and not a sound was to be heard, God alone knew what was being transacted in that frowning eyrie under the cover of the night.

Like most of those who have the unlucky leaven of imagination in their clay, my instinctive optimism is often on its trial. While I marched up and down in the darkness, trying vainly to keep warm, waiting for that tardy dawn in which death lurked for us all, I would have laid long odds that the doom of the Princess was sealed already and that my comrades in arms would share it.

A man should strive in some sort to figure as a hero when he comes to the purple patches in his own history. But if a profuse fear of the immediate future in combination with a lively horror of the present are compatible with that decree, so be it. Throughout those hours of inaction I suffered the torments of the damned.

Again and again I strained nervously to catch a footfall, and each time I did so Fitz's sinister injunction was in my ears. I recognised its wisdom, but what a counsel for a respectable law-abiding Englishman! Conceive the husband of Mrs. Arbuthnot, the father of Miss Lucinda, the sensitive product of a settled state of

society, lying in wait to knock out the brains of a fellow creature on hardly any pretext at all!

Prudence is not without a tenderness for those who court her; at least a liberal supply of tobacco was in my pouch. In a state of sheer desperation I smoked away the intolerable hours, and even had tobacco to share with the guides who placidly awaited the dawn in the lee of the horses.

These were rugged, silent, contained men. I had not a word of their language whatever it was, and I think it was a kind of Milesian *argot*. But there was an air of torpid responsibility about them. They were honest peasants, calm, unimaginative, faithful.

The hour of five was told from half a dozen steeples of the capital. In less than three short hours the fate of us all would be sealed. My mind went back to Middleshire and I could have wept for vexation. Everything was so happy and comfortable there. If Mrs. Arbuthnot did not see eye to eye with me in all things, an occasional discreet diversity of opinion merely served as a sauce to our life together.

Yes, life and all that pertained to it was very dear to me. It is proper, of course, to maintain a becoming reticence about that indissoluble core of egoism that lies at the heart of us all. But during these unspeakable hours I could not dissemble it. Why had it pleased fate to project this ill-starred creature, one altogether outside the circle of my interests, one alien in birth, in race, in fortune, into the quiet backwater of my years? Was there not a wantonness in shattering such a com-

fortable hedonism in this cruel, meaningless, irresponsible way?

What man can be a hero to his autobiographer? By all the rules of the game I ought to have been bathed in a kind of moral limelight as I walked my miserable beat throughout that cursed Illyrian night. It should be the easiest thing in the world to present a picture of stoical disdain for Dame Fortune and her fantasies.

But the blunt truth is before me, ignoble as it is. Life meant too much. The least of my thoughts should have been dedicated to that high and noble mission which had lured me from my happy home in an English county. I should have had my mind wholly concentrated on the fate of the royal lady and on that of those stout fellows who had come so far and who had endured so much that they might serve her.

Well, I will not deny that in a measure my thoughts were for them. But I did not dare to speculate on what had happened to them; their fate was too big with tragic possibilities. Yet ever uppermost within me was a sore vexation. I did not want in the least to die, and I was determined not to do so. Unhappily Fitz had not given me the password which in the last resort might take me across the bridge; I could not communicate with the guides; I was a stranger in a strange land.

Six o'clock was told from the steeples of the city, but there was not a sound from the castle rock. Despair gripped me by the heart. The Princess was dead and my friends had been unable to make their

way out of the fortress they had had the incredible foolhardiness to enter. But until daylight came I must wait at my post; yea, if I could contrive it, longer than that it behooved me to remain.

Already the sleeping city was beginning to stir uneasily. Distant sounds proceeded from it; within ten paces of our horses a farmer's wagon had passed along the road. Figures began to emerge from the darkness and to re-enter it. Doubtless they were workmen going to their toil. The icy blasts from the river congealed my blood. Half-past six tolled from the steeples; housemaids in pink print dresses were lighting the fires at Dympsfield House.

I began to scourge my brain for a plan of escape in broad daylight from this accursed place, in case Fitz did not return. But even my mind was numbed, and it was under the dominion of two clear facts: I did not know a word of the Illyrian tongue and I knew nothing of the habits and the customs of the country.

The row of heads upon the city gate occupied a chamber to themselves in the halls of my imagination. In whatever direction I turned my thoughts, there was that grisly frieze before my eyes. Presently I made the discovery that I had bitten the stem of my pipe clean through.

It was now seven o'clock and I had yielded up all hope of Fitz. So tragedy after all was to be the end of these wild oscillations which had begun with broad farce. The unhappy "circus rider from Vienna" had been done to death by the people for whom she had given all. Not only had they rejected her sacrifice but

they had requited it with brutal treachery. And the noble man who had loved her, and those brave fellows who had dared everything to serve her, regardless of lives they valued as highly as I did my own, had perished in her cause.

Rage and horror began to rise up within me. God in heaven, was this the end of our adventure? It was a quarter past seven; the whole city was astir.

The dawn was coming. There were a few faint streaks of grey already above the castle rock. Numbed and helpless I strained my eyes upwards to that sinister pile. Cold in body, faint in spirit, I knew not what to do, nor which way to turn. And then, before I could realise what had come to pass, there was a surge of dark and stealthy figures, there was a hand on my shoulder and a low voice was in my ears:

"The horses! The horses!"

CHAPTER XXXIV

THE CREATURES OF PERRAULT

Half paralysed as were the physical senses, there was a magic in the words. Involuntarily, scarcely knowing what I did, I helped to unloose the horses. I saw the others climb into their saddles; with a little friendly help I got into mine.

In the growing light of the dawn, we started at a gentle pace towards the old and quaint and many-gabled city. Yet it was still too dark to see who precisely was of our company. We came to the bridge, and halted while Fitz gave the password at the gate. Suspicious eyes were cast upon him, but they let us through.

At the farther gate Fitz gave the password again. There was a little delay in the course of which Fitz spoke in a jovial manner with the corporal of infantry. Finally another gold piece changed owners, and then we were allowed to pass on to the open country.

Without having to fire a shot, we had got clear of the city. As yet I knew nothing of what had happened during the hours of my suspense, but I was able to make out in the dim light that two of the other sex had augmented our company. One riding by the side of

Fitz had a familiar outline; the other, an unknown lady, was accommodated somewhat insecurely in front of the saddle of Joseph Jocelyn De Vere.

As we turned towards the mountain road there came the booming of a gun across the turbulent waters of the Maravina.

"They are awake at last," said a gruff voice at my elbow. The Chief Constable seemed very weary and very grim.

Hard and straight we rode through the comparatively easy country to the inn at the head of the Pass of Ryhgo. We had to be content with a change of horses here; there was not time to allow of anything else beyond a cup of spiced wine.

In broad daylight the Pass of Ryhgo was shorn of many of its terrors. But as we rode above the lake the path was so narrow and its turns so sharp that care was still necessary. Happily the wind was now dead.

Even now I was hardly in a state to realise what had occurred. The strain upon my mind was still acute; my faculties seemed to have got out of control.

"We had wonderful luck." The voice of the Chief Constable sounded remote and meaningless. "It was a devil of a climb up that rock, and I'll lay odds that we should never have got to the top at all, if Fitz hadn't remembered a secret stairway that led right into the heart of the place. Either the burghers of Blaenau had forgotten all about it or they didn't know of its existence. But Fitz remembered it all right as soon as he happened to see the hole in the rock. When we

got in, it was as black as the tomb, except for Fitz's lantern.

"It was a poisonous journey up an interminable flight of winding stone steps. It took us quite an hour to come to the end. And then we found ourselves confronted by a door of solid oak, which was three parts rotten. It took us another hour to cut through that, and Fitz's lantern went out and we had to keep striking matches. I shall never forget that hour in the dark until my dying day. And when we got through that infernal door at last, where do you suppose we found ourselves?"

"I cannot say," I said dreamily, with a vague eye upon the black waters of the lake below.

"Behind the tapestry of the King's bedroom. A marvellous piece of luck! It is a strange providence that watches over some things. And there we waited in the darkness, with our hands on our weapons, while Fitz made his way to the Princess and he brought her and her woman to us, and we got clear away without disturbing a soul."

"A wonderful and an incredible story!"

I began to have a fear that I might pitch from my horse. But we got through the fell Pass of Ryhgo at last, and by three o'clock that afternoon were in the presence of food, and a shelter and security in the hostelry a mile beyond the frontier. Thereupon a mute prayer passed up to heaven from the still shuddering soul of a married man, a father of a family and a county member.

The unknown lady whom Jodey had borne so gal-

lantly upon his saddle through the perilous mountain passes was none other than the Countess Etta von Zweidelheim, that lover of Schubert, that charming interpreter of Schumann who had made herself responsible for the statement that our memorable evening at the Embassy was "petter than Offenbach."

Even when she was lifted cold, hungry and desperately fatigued from the saddle of her cavalier, she was inclined to laugh; and we were able to raise among us a sort of hollow echo of her mirth when we observed the solemnity with which my relation by marriage escorted her to the stove and chafed her bloodless hands to restore the circulation.

The somewhat formal, perhaps slightly embarrassed nature of our laughter did not fail, even in these circumstances, of its customary appeal to her Royal Highness. Her own, however, unloosed a thousand memories which I shall carry to the grave, and perhaps beyond.

"Aha, *les Anglais!*" There was a maternal indulgence in the gaunt eyes. "*Très bons enfants!*" Her voice was low, canorous, quaintly caressing. "*Très bons enfants!*"

Suddenly she turned and gave both her hands to me. Lightly my lips touched the frozen fingers. For an instant my eyes were upon the strange pallor of her face; and then they met, in a kind of challenge, the sunken brilliancy which gave it life.

"The creatures of Perrault, ma'am," I said, rather hysterically.

THE END

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